EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES ON THE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE, AFRICAN AMERICAN SORORITY WOMEN ATTENDING A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, American colleges and universities have seen increases in the enrollments of undergraduate, African American women. The purpose of this research study was to examine the educational and social experiences of seven, undergraduate African American women attending a predominantly White institution in the Midwest. Utilizing Cross's model of Black Racial Identity Development (BRID), the research study explored how Black women have come to know their racial selves, prior to enrolling at an institution of higher education and currently through their membership in one of the four, traditional Black Greek sororities. Initial findings suggest that family, a sense of faith and the presence of role models or mentors were influential in Black women's development of a racial identity. Likewise, their initiation into one of the four, traditional Black Greek sororities has served as a coping mechanism while navigating a predominantly White learning environment, and assisted in providing women- and community-centered support systems.
Dedicated to my two, most favorite people in the world.
Kenneth, Sr. and Kenneth, Jr.
Thank you for your time and patience.
Both of you make life worth living.

Also to the women of "40 Ounces of Delta" and the Gamma Lambda, Raleigh Alumnae
and Charlotte Alumnae Chapters. thank you
for making me believe in the
"Crimson and Cream."
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1 Purpose

The residential college setting, its physical campus, academic curriculum, and co- and extra-curricular activities, offers a rich campus community and environment that assists young adults in creating and developing a positive sense of identity (Eimer, 2001). However, when Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) fail to create an environment and campus culture that is inclusive of African Americans then the nurturing and growth of a positive, racial identity may never occur. Tinto’s (1993) pioneering research on student retention suggests that institutions of higher learning should consider opportunities for leadership and involvement as a means for African American students to become educationally and socially integrated into campus life.

This research study explores the educational and social experiences of undergraduate African American women who are progressing through the development of their racial and gender identities, and who are members of one of the four, traditional Black Greek sororities through questions like the following: How have these women come to define their racial selves and what influence, if any, did their family and community socialization (prior to enrolling in college) have on their identity
development? To what degree has race been a critical issue in their pursuit of a college degree at a PWI? What types of educational and social support have their memberships in one of the four traditional Black Greek sororities provided? How have these peer organizations served as a coping mechanism?

1.2 Historical Overview

The formation of an identity for African American women encompasses two main dimensions: race and gender (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998). Historically, Black women have understood how both racism and sexism have defined their life experiences because they have “had to strive against both” (Giddings, 1984, p. 6). The institution of slavery had far-reaching implications for the racial identity development of Black women (Morgan, Mwegelo & Turner, 2002) because it defined human value for Black women intellectually, emotionally and physically in terms of their ability to be employed productive and reproductive (Almquist, 1995 as cited in Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). Triumphant over such demeaning circumstances posed complex challenges.

In spite of tumultuous life journeys many African American women have developed and internalized values and beliefs that encourage a positive sense of “self” (Giddings, 1984; Johnson-Bailey, 2000). Perhaps, this can be attributed to their ability to reframe negative or inappropriate images and create healthy perspectives about their race and gender. It appears that African American women constantly revisit these dual
identities, especially as they attempt to navigate through a predominantly White society (Blue, 2001). Thus, creating and finding a sense of “self” becomes a lifelong task.

Adolescence in particular is a critical period during the process of identity formation. Often adolescent women struggle to create self-images different from the inappropriate and distorted models offered through the media. Long before pursuing a college degree, adolescent African American females have already been exposed to images that portray them as troublemakers, teenage mothers and the recipients of social assistance (Hrabowski et al., 2002). Social and visual cues, including those in the mass media tend to present negative images of African American women that “denigrate or exclude” them altogether (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998, p. 71). Thus, the development of a positive racial identity might suffer if they internalize and accept popular beauty standards (i.e., light-skin, straight hair and blue eyes) where Caucasian role models are the norm (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001; Tatum, 1997). For African American women entering adolescence or young adulthood, identifying and accepting “who they are” can be even more difficult because their perceptions of self have been largely dictated by a majority, White society (White & Parham, 1990).

Young Black women in search of “self” have a variety of strategies for coping with being “Black” and “female.” Some have found solace in very troubling outlets either by engaging in sexual intercourse or abusing drugs and alcohol at a very young age (Robinson & Ward, 1991, as mentioned in Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998). Others tend to be overly concerned with their physical appearances or acknowledgement from peers (especially from African American males). If these needs remain unmet, young
Black women may assume “values, standards and behaviors” that inhibit their personal
consideration these continuing mismatches between personal and societal definitions it
should come as no surprise that achieving a comfortable “sense of self” remains a
constant struggle for Black women.

1.3 Problem Statement

Colleges and universities have been quite successful in recruiting and enrolling
African American undergraduates, particularly women. Approximately 12 percent of the
national population is African American while 11 percent of students enrolled in higher
education are Black (www.chronicle.com/prm/weekly/almanac/2003). Of these African
Americans, Black women constitute 63 percent (National Center for Education Statistics,
2003). Enrollment projections suggest that Black women will continue to outpace their
African American male counterparts in seeking undergraduate degrees at a variety of
institutions.

While the number of African American students seeking admission at PWIs
continues to increase, some of their educational and social experiences still do not
amount to a “bed of roses” (Fleming 1984, p. 17). Students of color often feel out of
place on predominantly White campuses (Arminio et al., 2000; Sutton & Kimbrough,
2001; Villalpando, 2002; Woodard & Sims, 2000). Some Black students experience
feelings of rejection, isolation and alienation from the majority culture (Fries-Britt, 2002).
Students of color tend to “differ from Whites in a variety of personal and socioeconomic
characteristics and their experiences of college differ in important ways from those of their white peers" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 166).

Specifically, these experiences may create a psychological tug-of-war, amplified for Black women who are often attempting to balance both their race and gender in an environment where many students may not share some of the same personal and physical characteristics. It is common for youth to wrestle with major life decisions; however, for African American college students, coming to terms with who they are "cannot completely avoid the reality of the social contradiction inherent in American life" (White & Parham, 1990, p. 46).

According to Blue (2001), "the lens of race illuminates those places where schooling at all educational levels, particularly postsecondary education, has fallen short of the promise of providing a democratic education for all people" (p. 123). Love (1993) suggests that Black students are often "ignored in classroom discussions or shut out of campus social life" (p. 28). Their historical contributions as a race or ethnic group may be overlooked or modified, and they may be made to feel more of a minority when their cultural histories are discussed "within the context of multiculturalism" (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998, as cited in Villalpando, 2002, p. 127). In other instances, they may be the only Black student present in class and called upon consistently to represent the diverse views and perspectives of the African American race (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998). Outside of the classroom environment, their experiences may be no different. Students of color who participate in predominantly White organizations and clubs often experience a disassociation from their cultural identity (Arminio, et al., 2000).
They confront issues of assimilation, having to decide whether or not to forsake their racial and cultural identity.

Having to confront and deal with race and gender issues on a daily basis continues to impact the educational and social experiences of African American women on predominantly White campuses. Without adequate social and cultural support, African American students, especially women, might not have the opportunity to journey towards “self” (O’Toole, 1999). To remedy the situation, experiences outside of the learning environment such as involvement in multicultural student organizations, traditional Black Greek life and athletic teams may provide the appropriate peer support for racial identity development (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996, as cited in Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Because women are less likely to find readily available role models in their desired fields (Belenky, et al., 1986), establishing partnerships or mentorships with professionals may create opportunities for supportive dialogue. More so for African American women, establishing these partnerships with African American female administrators, faculty and staff may help them progress along a positive racial identity continuum. Perhaps, they can experience a defined “sense of self” through professional women who live it everyday. Tatum’s (1997) assertion that universities and colleges provide physical, mental and emotional space for African American women to learn and gather within the higher education setting may prove beneficial as well. Historically, traditional, Black Greek sororities have done this and continue to do so today.
1.4 Description of the Study

This research study explores the educational and social experiences of seven, undergraduate African American women attending a large, Research-I University located in the Midwest, through the lens of racial identity. The university is the second-largest institution in the nation and has made a commitment to increase its enrollment of students of color. Although the university has made great strides, a significant imbalance still exists between the total undergraduate population and the number of minority students enrolled. The most recent statistical data suggests that on its main campus where women constitute more than half of the entire student population, only 6.9 percent of students are African American (http://www.osu.edu).

While there is a need to understand the collective experiences of all undergraduate, African American women at this particular university, this is not the aim of this research study. The author is primarily concerned with how Black women explore their racial and gender identity formation through membership in traditional, Black Greek sororities. Having been initiated as an undergraduate member nine years ago as well as having served as an undergraduate chapter advisor for three, the author has experiences both as an undergraduate and alumnae soror. Likewise, she has an understanding of the potential value these types of organizations can offer African American women within educational and social settings.

Two, qualitative methods have been used to assess and understand the participants' educational and social experiences: individual interviews and a single focus group. The author chose to let the research study "breathe and speak for itself;"
findings are not meant to be applicable to all undergraduate, Black women who attend a PWI (Seidman, 1998, p. 100). Broad aspects of the seven participants’ lives have been taken into consideration in order to appreciate fully how their educational and social experiences have differed from those who are members of the majority, White culture (Stanfield, 1994).

Examining and researching this particular topic requires great care because the tendency exists to “lump” the participants’ experiences together for generalization purposes, without acknowledging that there is diversity within diversity. Although many of the life experiences for African American women are similar in nature, to position every Black woman into a monolithic category would do an injustice to the very qualities and characteristics that define “who they are.” There is not a single or cookie cutter image of what an undergraduate, Black woman is supposed to be. Homogenizing this distinct population prevents the celebration of each individual, especially in reference to how they have come to define themselves in terms of their race and gender.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The numbers of quantitative and qualitative studies that speak to the racial identity formation process, as they pertain to African American students, are at a minimum. Thirteen years ago, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) argued that the research addressing the identity development process for students of color was “virtually unknown territory” and posed “a glaring and embarrassing gap in our theoretical knowledge” (p. 59). In 1993, Chickering and Reisser noted that numerous factors influence a student’s
identity formation process, but those specific to the experiences of African American students needed to be researched thoroughly. Even further, the author would contend that past and current research studies fail to address specific student sub-populations within a given population, instead assuming that all students who identify with that population share all of the same educational and social experiences. Specifically, there is little research that addresses the racial and gender identity formation processes for undergraduate, African American women. Because existing studies fail to explore the factors that trigger identity change in minority students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), some argue that additional research is needed to understand how attending college impacts racial identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

1.6 Applicability of the Research Study

The author’s hope is that this research study will inform student affairs practitioners who interact daily with this specific population, as well as assist institutions of higher education in attracting, enrolling, retaining and graduating undergraduate, African American women. Through an extensive review of the literature, as well as considering her own personal experiences and familiarity with this student sub-culture, the author has designed a study that incorporates previous research as well as the perspectives of current students through individual interviews and a single focus group. The results from this study may provide insight into how other undergraduate, women of color at institutions of higher education navigate and function within the campus environment. The results may also yield stark contrasts with the experiences of African
American women who join sororities at HBCUs. In general, the findings will be of importance to admissions and student retention offices, minority and women student services, student activities, Greek leadership offices and others who are committed to creating inclusive and diverse learning environments. These findings should also be relevant for the very administrators, faculty and staff who are employed to ensure that the pressing issues and needs facing undergraduate, African American female students are addressed and met aggressively.

1.7 Definition of Terms

Throughout this research study, the author used “Black” and “African American” as interchangeable terms that described the race or ethnicity of a specific group of people. Yanow (2003) would argue against using these terms interchangeably advocating that both terms are “socially constructed-concepts” and are “perceived and understood to be human inventions” (p. vii). He would further suggests that their use is not “scientifically grounded” and would only complicate the already existing complexities surrounding group membership and affiliation in the United States (p. x). However, Cross (1991) maintains that the “self-referents that most Blacks employ are Black, Black American, and African American” (p. 189). The author acknowledged that all of the descriptions could take on numerous meanings depending on when and where they are used. For the purposes of this research study, the terms described the participants who identified themselves as being of a darker hue or of African descent.
The author’s definition of a racial identity is consistent with the literature. Similar to Cross (1991), the author defined racial identity and its formation as a process in which a person of color comes to know their racial self and the specific racial community he or she chooses to identify with. Cross’s (1991) model of Black Racial Identity Development suggests that racial identity development occurs through four, specific stages. However, instead of formally assessing each of the women and placing them at a particular stage, the author considered the characteristics of each stage in light of the seven women’s self-perspectives on how being Black or African American has influenced their educational and social experiences.

The researcher at times referred to the sororities by their official Greek-letter names (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho.) It should be noted that all of the traditional, Black Greek sororities are functioning corporations. Thus, the title “Sorority, Incorporated” follows each of their official monikers. However for brevity, the aforementioned organizations may be referred to individually as “AKA,” “Delta,” “Zeta” and “SG Rho,” or collectively as the “traditional, four Black Greek sororities.” The terms, “line sisters” or “sands” refer to young women who were initiated in the same organization at the same time. “Soror” is also used throughout the study and is a title that is used to describe all members of a sorority. In describing the entire Black Greek fraternal system, the researcher often called the organizations the “Big Nine” or the “Divine Nine.” Likewise, new initiates who join Black Greek fraternities or sororities complete a “Membership Intake Process” or the “process by which interested persons become members of most Black Greek-lettered
organizations” (Kimbrough, 2003, p. 194). Prior to 1990, the process was known as the “pledge period.” These definitions were consistent with the fraternal literature (Kimbrough, 2003).

In the same manner, the acronyms HBCU and PWI referred to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominantly White Institutions respectively. Traditionally on predominantly White campuses, Black Greek sororities and fraternities are treated as a student club or organization. Unlike their White Greek counterparts, many of their organizations are non-residential or do not own a “Greek House.”
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

An extensive review of the literature yields a limited number of studies that address the racial identity formation of undergraduate, African American women attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The research studies that explore specific, student sub-cultures within the learning environment, including sororities, are even fewer. However, by understanding the basic premises of identity development, including both race and gender, the experiences that may influence the journeys of young African American women, the challenges and dilemmas that students of color face on predominantly White campuses, and the value of traditional Black Greek life, it is possible to suggest several key factors that may influence how Black women develop a racial identity. The resulting framework locates an undergraduate, Black woman at the center with influential factors encircling her very being and supporting her ability to discover “self.” Not only does this framework provide the opportunity to view and understand how the factors of influence may interact, separately or collectively, but also how they may impact an African American woman’s formation of a racial identity.
Most of the pertinent literature from which the key factors of influence evolve can be categorized into five groupings:

2.2 Concepts of Identity Development
2.3 Race and Gender Identity Development
2.4 Environmental Factors Prior to College Enrollment
2.5 Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), African American Women and Racial Identity Development
2.6 Multicultural and Black Greek Life Organizations

Gaps in the current literature are discussed as well. Likewise, both the five groupings and gaps begin to provide insight into the development of the three research questions presented in Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology.

2.2 Concepts of Identity Development

A complete discussion of identity development must reference the pioneering research of Erikson (1968). Erikson suggests that identity formation is an ever-evolving process and requires a significant amount of personal reflection. It is a process of "increasing differentiation" in which an individual confronts a series of challenges, attempts to resolve them and then assumes an additional layer of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 23). Erikson's (1968) research revolves primarily around the epigenetic principle or the notion that the life experience occurs in stages or phases in which one progresses at any particular moment, "until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole" (p. 92). Identity development becomes a lifelong process in which one is confronted with crises that might provoke and result in a meaningful experience that encourages progression or regression to another stage of life. Thus, an individual's developmental learning is supported by their ability to acknowledge a reason for change.
Erikson categorized his research into eight, distinct stages of psychosocial development spanning from infancy well into adulthood. Researchers who are particularly interested in the identity development of young adults place a special emphasis on the fifth stage, identity vs. identity confusion. This particular stage can become the most pertinent for young adults who are college bound (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The fifth stage is most critical in their development “because without an ideological simplification of the universe, the adolescent ego cannot organize experience according to its specific capacities and its expanding involvement” (Erikson, 1968, p. 27).

The concepts and models of identity development that are applicable to this study build upon the basic premises provided by Erikson (1968). The formation of an identity is usually stage or phase specific. Likewise, an individual must confront or encounter a situation that perhaps will be life changing. Eventually, the individual will either progress to a later stage or phase of development when the situation is analyzed and put into perspective or regress to an earlier stage if the challenge is overwhelming. For instance, Marcia et al. (1993) approach identity formation from an “ego developmental and psychoanalytical” perspective (p. 5). Similar to Erikson (1968), they contend that a crisis must occur before an individual can commit to making lifestyle and professional decisions, including career, spiritual, political and sexual (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Identity formation and consequently, resolution, occur when individuals progress through four, main stages: 1). Identity-diffused; 2). Foreclosed; 3). Moratorium; 4). Identity Achieved.
Movement along the psychosocial spectrum has also been explored by Chickering and Reisser (1993). Both contend that the development of identity is the result of a "growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem" (p. 173). Pascarella and Terenzini (1993) concur, and suggest that an individual establishes an identity when they have progressed through Chickering’s first three vectors, including competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy. The development of "self," or the fourth vector, then assists students in achieving the final three: participating in interpersonal relationships, finding a purpose in life, and developing integrity. McEwen (2001) reinforces this assertion by acknowledging that "achieving an identity is the culmination of earlier developmental tasks in the life cycle, and it is a building block for later developmental tasks" (p. 191).

While the aforementioned models provide a suitable framework for understanding the formation of identity in all adolescents, they are not inclusive of diverse, cultural perspectives. Some would argue that these identity models do not take into consideration how dominant, social and cultural norms have affected African American adolescents and thus their ability to develop an identity (Dinsmore & Mallinckrodt, 1996). Likewise, existing identity development theories are inadequate when addressing the needs of minority students (Woodard & Sims, 2000) and tend to suggest that specific distinctions between racial and gender populations are not significant (Parks, Carter & Gushue, 1996). Howard-Hamilton (1997) believes that "operable theories of student development may still need to be created for African Americans" in order to understand how they
achieve racial identity (p. 18). Therefore, one might safely conclude that the current identity development concepts, models and theories are not racially- or culturally-sensitive. In particular, for African American, female students, the identity development process differs slightly, in that it primarily encompasses race and gender.

2.3 Race, Gender and Multiple Identities Development

Although a number of racial identity models have developed out of the Black psychology literature and are worth mentioning, the pioneering research of Cross (1991) has been the most influential for understanding Black racial identity development (See Chart 2.1, Racial and Gender Identity Models). According to Cross, Parham, and Helms (1998), the formation of a racial identity among African Americans has been influenced by two conflicting factors: the processes of deracination and Nigrescence. Deracination refers to the educational, social, and cultural forces that have prevented Blacks from fully exploring “who they are,” while the latter pertains to their desire to achieve a “sense of self” in relation to their race and ethnic background. In order to move towards achieving a sense of identity, an individual must experience a deculturalization from the majority culture, and “a revitalization through the process of Nigrescence” (Cross, Parham, & Helms, p. 4).

Cross’s Nigrescence theory proposes that African Americans move through stages according to how they come to see themselves in terms of their culture and heritage (Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996). An individual of both African and American
descents experience his or her “Blackness” by entering in and departing from four formal stages as described below:

1). Pre-Encounter: In this stage, African Americans do not prescribe to a specific racial categorization and prefer not to attach to any quality or characteristic that would be defined as Black.

2). Encounter: The individual may then experience an activity or event that supports racial pride and prompts a change in their personal attributes (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). It is during this phase that a Black person may undertake a serious search for “self.”

3). Immersion-Emersion: As a Black person progresses out of the Encounter stage, they may begin to reject the traditional and institutional thoughts and structures that concern race, and immerse him or herself in their African heritage and culture. Tatum (1997) suggests that an individual of African descent may “unlearn” what has been taught previously, and “redefine a positive sense of self” by participating in culturally rich activities and events in the comfort of other Black peers (p. 76). However, while this particular stage can be enlightening, it also is the most challenging to experience (Cross, Parham & Helms, 1998).

4). Internalization: The internalization stage allows an African American to internalize “who they are” both racially and culturally; thus, leading to a more holistic identity formation process. Furthermore, they possess the ability to rise above encounters and incidents that are the result of racism.

A fifth stage, Internalization-Commitment was added in a revised model; but, was later removed after a number of empirical studies could not determine if it constituted a formal stage or was an additional element of the fourth (Stokes, et al. 1998).

At the same time, both African American and White women share the unique characteristic of gender. The development of gender identity is the process by which one views him or herself in respect to their own sex (McEwen, 2001). Specifically for women, gender identity evolves from the traditional roles or positions that are usually associated with being female. Because all women at some point in their personal
development have experienced oppression, "sexism" may be one of the many "isms" that remain at the core of their life experiences (p. 202).

Similar to the aforementioned identity formation models, several models of gender identity development attempt to explore various levels of sexism and personal growth. Both Downing & Roush's (1985) Feminist Identity Development Model and Ossana, Helms, and Leonard's Womanist Identity Model (1992) outline a process of seeking "self" where women proceed through stages that allow them to explore gender-specific roles as well as examine how those roles are socially defined. Similar to Cross's Nigrescence Theory (1991), Downing and Roush (1985) suggest that women come to define "self" by acknowledging traditional, gender roles in the Passive-Acceptance stage. This process is also similar to the Pre-encounter stage as described by Ossana, Helms, & Leonard (1992). As they progress through the aforementioned, a "crisis, or series of crises or contradictions" in social roles may be experienced. The crisis may be experienced by women Revealing or Encountering feelings of "anger and guilt" towards men (McNamara & Rickard, 1989, p. 184). However, this constant tension with men is eased through the Embeddedness-Emanation/Immersion-Emersion stage, in which they experience an overwhelming sense of sisterhood and are able to connect with other women who are beginning to accept "self." Once a woman has achieved Synthesis/Internalization then they are able to conceive a positive image of "self" thus leading to an affirmed identity (McEwen, 2001, p. 203).

While a commitment to Synthesis/Internalization may be the ultimate goal for a positive, development of gender, for women of color, their identity development
constructs itself through a lens of "double oppression" (Arminio, et al., 2000, p. 504). Specifically, Caucasian women are a part of the majority culture and African American women remain members of the non-dominant and non-majority population; and, their value of "self" develops out of the standards and expectations as defined by the dominant group (Parks, Carter, and Gushue, 1996). Tatum (1997) has found that Caucasian students rarely classify themselves in terms of a racial identity. McEwen (2001) suggests that some Whites rarely think of themselves in terms of race because as members of the majority culture, they "have not had to face or name their race and the various characteristics, attributes, and privileges associated with it" (p. 194). Therefore race or ethnicity, in terms of personal identity, is not a concern. Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas (2001) suggest that Black women, by contrast, strive to cope in environments that demean their race and gender. Because racial and sexual barriers have been erected to keep African American women from fully understanding themselves, Alfred (2001) believes this should further drive their desire and need for self-empowerment.

Since Black women contemplate primarily dual identities, it might be helpful to explore the research of Jones and McEwen (2000). The researchers suggest that while the majority of developmental models focus solely on one aspect or dimension of an individual's core identity, doing so prevents understanding fully how other social identities might intersect and affect identity development. In their study on how ten, racially-, ethnically- and spiritually-diverse, undergraduate women navigated their sense of "self" in relation to other social identities, the researchers found "ten key categories"
that "were interrelated" (p. 408). Likewise, when the key categories were interwoven they constituted the core identity of each participant.

This concept is better explained through their Model of Multiple Identities. Jones & McEwen (2000) contend that at the center of identity for women exist a core identity consisting of "personal attributes and characteristics" (p. 409). Encircling that core identity are contextual influences such as "race, culture, gender, family....and religion" (p. 408). Thus, and individual's core identity may be shaped by "multiple intersecting dimensions" that assume importance or become prevalent depending on the type of situation or environment the individual encounters (p. 408).

The model proposed by Jones and McEwen (2000) might not only be helpful in understanding how undergraduate, African American women balance and shift between race and gender, but also how other social factors like family influence, faith, role models and mentors and in- and pre-college experiences impact their sense of "self." Because the educational and social experiences of African American women may vary, the model is flexible enough to permit an individual to explore multiple identities throughout various contexts, without being constrained to a particular stage or phase.

### 2.4 Environmental Factors Prior to College Enrollment

The collegiate environment provides a unique forum for a student to begin to shape an identity. However, before enrolling in an institution of higher education, several environmental factors may have already influenced the racial identity formation of Black students. Chickering & Reisser (1993) contend that a student of color might have already achieved a positive, racial identity through an exploration of his or her culture, personal
interactions with immediate and extended family members, participation in cultural holidays and “traditions and rituals,” while maintaining a connection to their historical past. Likewise, parenting methods and the type of community or neighborhood where an African American child is reared may have influenced how he or she establishes an identity (Marcia et al., 1993). Hughes’s (2003) research on racial identity development and the role of family suggests that parents’ personal beliefs often “transmit world views about race and ethnicity” (p. 15). She classifies this type of parental guidance as racial socialization:

Although racial socialization occurs in all families, it is thought to be particularly relevant to ethnic minority families, due to the fact that social stratification and negative group stereotypes complicate the child rearing tasks that they need to accomplish. (p. 15)

Thus, Black parents, immediate and extended family members, role models and mentors may serve as the initial contacts for an African American child experiencing racial identity formation.

The identity formation process experienced by African American children can be “mediated by other dimensions of self” including their religious affiliation (Tatum, 1997). With spiritual and communal qualities being at the very core of their existence. African American, faith-based institutions continue to be an indelible force in the lives of Black Americans. Black institutions of faith have assisted African Americans in carving out an identity rooted in their racial heritage. Its various denominations have been at the center of the African American experience, shaping and influencing “religious, cultural, social and political aspects of life in America” (Gadzekpo, 1997, p. 96). Research
conducted by Whitson (1997) suggests that in response to numerous life challenges Black women in particular have been able to establish a direct link to Black churches, using them as “support networks” (p. 383). Likewise, their existence continues to provide both a spiritual and racial awareness by assuming an “Afrocentric perspective” and offering “culturally relevant information” (Tatum, 1997, p. 83).

Stewart (2002) confirmed the importance of faith grounded in an Afrocentric perspective through her qualitative study on the importance of faith in the lives of African American students attending a small, predominantly White college in the Midwest. Understanding the way an African American comes to learn of, practice, embrace and internalize faith is a direct result of his or her origins and the trials and tribulations of being Black in America (Myers, 1993). This “Afrocentric philosophy” stipulates that occurrences in life have a purpose or meaning; thus, creating a life balance that is perhaps “divinely ordered” (p. 592). Basing her research on the experiences of five students who had achieved at least junior or senior status, Stewart’s (2002) initial findings suggest that four out of the five interviewees embraced some form of spirituality, which had impacted who they were in terms of their self-identities. However, Stewart (2002) also discovered that the term “spirituality” was loosely defined amongst the participants and served different roles as participants moved from forming multiple identities into one, integrated self.
2.5 Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), African American Women, and Racial Identity Development

While the specific literature addressing the educational and social experiences of African American women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) is limited, studies that examine the collective experiences of African Americans at such institutions are far more numerous (Arminio et al., 2000; Fries-Britt, 2002; Villalpando, 2002; Woodard & Sims, 2000). Fleming’s (1984) groundbreaking study on the experiences of African Americans in college remains heavily cited because it specifically examined the “influence of college racial composition on the intellectual development of college students” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 137). Interestingly enough, a part of her research cohort consisted of 204 freshman and senior students enrolled at the same university as this study. Overall, Fleming’s research efforts concluded that “Black students exhibit so many contradictions in development that it is hard to tell where they stand as seniors” (p. 126). Although Fleming found that there was little cognitive growth, Black students did take an interest in student organizations and often held professors in high regard. Black female students in particular tended to “exhibit stronger militant attitudes” by their senior year (p.127); however, Fleming also suggested that regardless of the type of institution an African American female chooses, they were seriously “anxious about their own competencies” (p. 144). Fleming alluded to the same factors that researchers twenty years later still highlight as major obstacles and challenges facing Black students on predominantly White campuses: feelings of isolation and
marginalization, racially hostile living and learning environments, a lack of African American administrators, faculty and staff, ethnically-based courses and limited student services.

Willie's (2003) recent study on the effect of race on the lives of Black students attending both Howard University (an HBCU) and Northwestern University (a PWI) underscores similar findings of Fleming (1984). Particularly in response to the Northwestern alumni, who attended the university between the late 1960s and 1980s, several of the participants stated that it should be the university's responsibility to ensure that students of color are welcomed to and in the university setting (Willie, 2003). They recommended that the university explore smaller class sizes, host multicultural organizations and clubs on campus and offer opportunities to participate in fraternal life (regardless if it is traditionally Black or White Greek life). According to Willie (2003), constituencies at PWIs must be committed to:

Sitting down together as departments, divisions and groups with representative employees from throughout the organization to talk through crucial issues of how race, gender and class stratification are played out with regard to students, staff and faculty. (p. 160)

Consistent with the experiences of Blacks on predominantly, White campuses, Littleton's (2003) research on 16 African American students (who were either athletes or non-athletes) and their experiences at four, predominantly White institutions located in Southern Appalachia suggests that universities can be more accommodating of the educational and social needs of African American students, particularly as it relates to
their abilities to establish a sense of community, but also one that reflects the diversity within the African American race. The Black students in his study were able to persist as a result of "faculty influence" or the "opportunity to get acquainted with faculty members inside and outside the classroom" (p. 98). Likewise, the opportunity to get involved in "African American social organizations" assisted the students in their initial transition into the college environment and throughout their matriculation (p. 98). The involvement of family members and maintaining a positive attitude also aided in their educational and social successes.

2.6 Multicultural and Black Greek Life Organizations

Several research studies suggest that African American students may get involved in student and campus organizations for reasons that differ significantly from their White peers. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) confirm this notion in their research on the purpose and importance of multicultural organizations at both HBCUs and PWIs. Unlike traditional student groups and clubs that serve the entire student body, Black students may benefit from multicultural organizations, which serve primarily students of color, because they offer "greater opportunities to share their skills and talents with the African American community," (p. 32). Utilizing the Involvement and Leadership Scale developed by Kimbrough (1995), 989 surveys were sent to students throughout seven states. Four-hundred and five students who identified as African American and were of sophomore status responded to the instrument that inquired about their level of
participation in multicultural organizations as well as to those student groups and clubs that are not related to either race or ethnicity.

The findings suggest that there were considerable differences between the types of organizations Black students joined and that this varied depending on the type of institution they attended. For instance, at HBCUs (where African American students are generally in the majority) many sought out involvement and leadership opportunities through their residence halls, student government associations, orientation programs and educational-related organizations. However at PWIs, 75.8 percent of Black students were engaged actively (yet solely) in Black-affiliated organizations such as multicultural clubs or Black Greek life, rather than the broader-based campus organizations. The research also suggests that African American students who were members of Black Greek life tended to achieve higher grade point averages (GPAs) than those who were not members. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) maintain that although some Black students at PWIs pursue residential, orientation and student government positions, “it is not surprising that minority student organizations remain the primary venue for Black students at predominantly White campuses” (p. 37).

Guiffrida’s (2003) qualitative research study on how Black student organizations aid in the social integration of Black students at a “mid-sized PWI in the Northeastern part of the United States” is useful as well (p. 306). Through individual interviews and focus groups, the researcher was able to ascertain and learn about the educational and social experiences of 88 Black students, 67 of who were participating in an academic assistance program. By asking open-ended questions, Guiffrida compiled findings that
were consistent with the current literature on Black students on predominantly White campuses and the purposes of African American student organizations.

Overall, his findings suggest that Black students participate in educational, social, governmental and religious-affiliated organizations because they foster and create opportunities to interact with faculty outside of the learning environment, provide opportunities for community service and offer a level of comfort for students who are in the racial and ethnic minority. His findings also raise a new perspective and point out that Black students who may have not been reared in predominantly Black neighborhoods or schools might view these types of organizations as a way to interact with other African American students. Their experiences vary however; whereas some Black students participate in race or ethnic-themed student organizations for cultural support, other Black students experience severe difficulties in interacting with their African American peers. Guiffrida argues that the transitional, educational and social successes of these Black students may depend on their level of involvement in multicultural organizations since the “potential exists for the groups to significantly impact their social integration and racial identity development” (p. 316). Further, he suggests that additional research explore the importance and influence of multicultural organizations on the transition and matriculation of African American students, the possible influence of Black students’ organizational memberships on their racial identity development and the way multicultural organizations aid in achieving positive academic outcomes.

Guiffrida’s (2003) claims were consistent with the findings of Saylor & Aries (1999), who four years earlier confirmed that a positive view of ethnic identity could
result from participating in multicultural or ethnic student organizations. Saylor and Aries's (1999) quantitative analysis of 93 students found that ethnic-themed organizations provided a significant amount of educational and social support. Similar to Guiffrida (2003), several of their research participants who were reared in predominantly White neighborhoods suggested that multicultural organizations offered a cultural space where they were able to access ethnic history and cultural traditions as well as establish social networks and friendships.

The literature review confirms the need for additional research that addresses the formation of racial identity for all African American women and the impact of attendance at a PWI. Likewise, there needs to be a serious exploration of how involvement in traditional Black Greek life may influence their educational and social maturation processes. Graham (2000) contends that Black fraternities and sororities serve meaningful purposes during and after the undergraduate experience, oftentimes providing appropriate avenues and "forums through which some of the best-educated Blacks in America can discuss an agenda to fight racism and improve conditions for other less-advantaged Blacks" (p. 85).

Current studies addressing the role of Black Greek organizations were difficult to locate; however, one particular study was uncovered that spoke to the experiences of both White and Black women who are members of sororities. In their study on the differences between White and Black sororities, Berkowitz and Padavic (1999) hypothesized that some women who join sororities, regardless of race, are attempting to make sense of and
experience gender-specific roles. Because these types of student organizations are structured so that members interact on a daily basis or perhaps dwell together, sororities provide the appropriate forum for young women to "interpret and refine" societal, sexual and even racial messages (p. 532). Citing the historical and current life experiences of White and black women in this country and the similarities and differences, the researchers' interviews of 26 sorority women (13 Black and 13 White) resulted in data that confirmed several ideas and concepts that are consistent with other areas of the pertinent literature. First, significant differences exist between Black and White sororities. The researchers contend that:

While White sororities are structured to largely ignore the career message and concentrate on the more traditional goal of pairing ("getting a man"), Black sororities are organized to facilitate economic self-sufficiency ("getting ahead," in the words of these women) and to contribute to the betterment of the Black community. (p. 532)

In the same manner, White sororities foster this sense of "getting a man" by planning specific rituals and traditions that celebrate the pairing between a sorority woman and hopefully, a fraternity man. On the other hand, African American women who are involved in traditional, Black Greek life tend not to use sororities as a "matchmaking service," but rather to engage in meaningful community service and campus programming. Their contact with the opposite sex may come in the form of either event collaboration or social activities that tend to focus on the entire group's participation, rather than on individuals or couples.
While the social aspects of both sorority styles differ significantly, those differences become even more pronounced when sorority involvement is viewed in terms of professional and career development. For the African American participants, initiation into a sorority meant committing to public service, not only while they completed their undergraduate degrees, but also when they graduate and become members of graduate or alumnae chapters. According to the researchers, “Black women described community service as a central and meaningful part of their sorority experience, while White women generally viewed it as a way to facilitate their social lives” (p. 546). This finding concurs with the aforementioned research conducted by Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) and Guiffrida (2003).

Specifically, members of the traditional, Black Greek sororities stressed the importance of professional and career development. Berkowitz and Padavic (1999) maintain that membership in a Black sorority ensures a connection, with older and perhaps more established, professional African American women who serve as role models. Not only do these relationships provide guidance, but also opportunities for career exploration. The undergraduate, sorority members in this study were able to engage with alumnae members who lived out their personal and professional aspirations everyday. The researchers could not ignore this significant finding, suggesting that sorority membership for the Black women they interviewed was “a part of their identity and would remain with them throughout the course of their lives” (p. 548). Likewise, both researchers cautioned others to not simply assume that the life experiences of White women were applicable to women of color, and agreed that future
research studies might examine the dynamics of race and gender and how both intersect in "situated contexts."

In order to move towards a positive development of racial identity and to acknowledge their historical being in educational and social contexts, much is required and expected of young, African American women. West (1993) maintains that the path towards racial identity "involves self-respect and self-regard" (p. 97). Although the identity experience for college-aged African American women may challenge their personal convictions in relation to their gender and race, those who are able to explore "self" have a greater opportunity of developing a natural and healthy identity (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998). Likewise, they are better equipped to handle obstacles arising from race and gender related issues, and are in control of their racial identity development, especially in a predominantly White setting. Blue (2001) agrees, and challenges Black women in their journey to define "who they are" to routinely assess their life experiences and how these occurrences influence them in their "African-ness, American-ness, and Woman-ness" (p. 135).

2.7 Gaps in the Literature

Throughout chapters one and two, the obvious gaps in the research literature have been uncovered and highlighted. Although much of the literature cited has utilized a range of methods to assess racial identity development in African American females, few studies have addressed the specific, student sub-culture under investigation. Racial identity development (coupled with gender identity development) for Black women remains a pressing topic for those interested in their personal and professional growth.
and therefore, must be addressed. In order for colleges and universities to assess whether or not their campus communities are supporting racial identity development, additional research needs to be carried out. Pertinent administrators, faculty and staff, who come into contact with undergraduate, Black women should be knowledgeable of their developmental processes, stages or phases they are experiencing and the educational and social goals they are struggling to achieve. In their own research on how therapists interact with patients, Parks, Carter, and Gushue (1996) believe that without proper training on racial and gender related issues, therapists' abilities to understand a multicultural perspective will be deficient. Likewise, assuming that all psychological reasoning and theories apply to all individuals only presents a "monolithic view" in regard to identity development (p. 624).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race or Gender Identity Formation</th>
<th>Black Racial Identity Development</th>
<th>Feminist Identity Development</th>
<th>Womanist Identity Development</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Encounter: An African American does not prescribe to a specific racial categorization;</td>
<td>Pre-Encounter: Accepting specific personal and professional roles that are regulated in women;</td>
<td>Pre-Encounter: Accepting specific personal and professional roles that are regulated in women;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encounter: The individual may experience an incident that supports racial pride;</td>
<td>Encounter: Experiencing an incident that calls those roles into question;</td>
<td>Encounter: Experiencing an incident that calls those roles into question;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion: A Black person may begin to reject the traditional and institutional thoughts that he or she has been taught;</td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion: Immersing oneself and celebrating sisterhood;</td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion: Immersing oneself and celebrating sisterhood;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internalization: An internalization of race occurs, leading to a more holistic identity formation process</td>
<td>Internalization: Internalizing a positive image of a female self;</td>
<td>Internalization: Internalizing a positive image of a female self;</td>
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Table 2.1 Race and Gender Identity Models
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study connected the current literature with the respondents’ educational and social experiences as they related to racial identity formation and membership in a traditional, Black Greek sorority at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Although a quantitative assessment might have yielded empirical data that could be generalized to this specific population, my desire to understand the participants’ life stories could not be “arrived at by statistical means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). Rather, I wanted to delve into the respondents’ life experiences and “capture the human meanings of social life” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 163).

I was concerned primarily with investigating the following research questions. 1. Prior to enrolling in an institution of higher learning, what are the life experiences that have already influenced and shaped undergraduate, Black women’s racial identity development? How have they come to define their racial identity? How have their families encountered and dealt with race? How did their family members and social communities acknowledge their racial heritage? How has race been
an issue in their educational careers? What impact have family members, role models and a commitment to faith had on their socialization prior to and during their enrollment?

2. How has race impacted their pursuit of a college degree as well participation in co-and extra-curricular activities while enrolled at a PWI? What were their initial perceptions of the college or university experience? What have their educational and social journeys been like as undergraduate, African American women on a predominantly White campus? How have they utilized campus resources that are designed specifically for students of color and marketed to aid in a successful matriculation? How were their definitions of a racial self altered since their arrival? Likewise, has that definition affected how they interact with other students of color and non-minority students?

3. How does membership in one of the four, traditional Black Greek sororities impact the racial identity development of undergraduate African American women? Does membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta or Sigma Gamma Rho support or hinder racial identity formation? What are the benefits of membership? How did they come to learn about these types of student organizations? What types of educational or social support do these peer organizations provide? Does a particular stage in the racial identity continuum take on significant meaning when they interact with chapter members, as well as with other minority and non-minority peers? Do they share common experiences that can possibly shed insight into how undergraduate African American women can further develop a sense of racial "self?”
3.2 Research Design

The decision to conduct a qualitative study not only gave "voice" to each participant, but assisted me in understanding the substance of the participants' life experiences, or perhaps a "phenomenon about which little is yet known" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19). Seidman (1998) contends that the overall objective of phenomenological research is to require the participant to "reconstruct his or her experience" as it pertains to the research study (p. 9). Schwandt (2001) suggests that phenomenological research allows the researcher to acknowledge the "subjective experiences" of the research participants (p. 192). In qualitative research, subjectivity often refers to understanding the research participants' "personal views" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 242). Delving into the life experiences of the research participants assumes a greater responsibility when the goal is to be subjective because the researcher has to "deal with how social objects are made meaningful" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p. 263). By approaching this research study from a phenomenological perspective, I was able to "build upon and explore the participants' responses" (Seidman, 1998, p. 9) and interpret the meaning of their life experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

This research study employed a snowball sampling technique in which participants were invited to participate with the possibility that they would be able "to identify additional participants" (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 117). This type of sampling method allowed me to target a specific sub-culture while yielding a sample size that was manageable and purposive in nature. Likewise, the sampling method was most appropriate for this type of research study because it allowed me to choose women who
were “thoughtful, informative, articulate and experienced with the research topic and setting” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 116). The target population consisted of 7 African Americaa women (one from Alpha Kappa Alpha, four from Delta Sigma Theta and two from Sigma Gamma Rho) who had attained junior classification and attended their large, Research-I University in the Midwest since their freshman year. It was important for each participant to have been an undergraduate student for at least three years so that they could offer a seasoned perspective of campus life, unlike students who may have just arrived or transitioned into their second year. The use of snowball sampling yielded participants who were completing different academic majors, hailing from various geographical locations and being reared in different types of family settings. All of the research participants, however, had made it a priority to participate in Black Greek life.

3.3 Elements of Research

Great care was taken to ensure that the data collected accurately reflected the educational and social experiences of the participants. Two, specific methods of data collection were used: individual interviews and a single, focus group. There are several reasons why interviewing is important when conducting qualitative research, and if done well, can yield significant data that might agree with or inform the current literature. Seidman (1998) maintains that the process of interviewing is at the very foundation of making sense of an individual’s life experiences, and it can give a “beginning, middle and end” to their narrative (p. 1). Likewise, the process of interviewing can be useful in “generating and analyzing data” that confirms research participants’ life experiences.
(Schwandt, 2001, p. 135). In the same manner, focus groups permit participants to connect with the experiences of others, which "may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Even further, Stanfield (1994) argues that by being a member of a socially constructed racial category, being "Black" for African American women may take on greater meaning:

When it comes to qualitative research, whether we focus on the research, the examined human beings, data analysis, or knowledge dissemination, the point is that ascribed status influences the meanings of the subject’s experiences. (p. 176)

Stanfield’s assertion aligns itself with this research study on racial identity development and undergraduate, African American women.

Search for Participants

Prior to beginning the actual interviewing process, I submitted a formal application to the Ohio State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) in mid October of 2003 (see Appendix A). The HSRB granted an exemption at the end of the same month. The search for participants began with visiting sororities’ websites and securing members’ university electronic-mail (e-mail) addresses. An initial letter of interest was distributed by e-mail to 33 women who belonged to one of the four, traditional Black Greek sororities (see Appendix B). I also attended a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) meeting in November 2003 in which I met with chapter

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presidents and representatives to present my research study (the NPHC is the official body that governs the nine, traditional Black Greek fraternities and sororities). Interested members were encouraged to participate as well as share the research study information with other sorority members. Unfortunately during the meeting, I learned that Zeta Phi Beta was not active currently on campus. Two, different sorority representatives also confirmed that some organizational websites were not updated from the 2002-2003 academic year and may have listed outdated officers’ information and members’ university e-mail addresses.

E-mailing potential participants and attending the NPHC meeting yielded four women (one member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, two members of Delta Sigma Theta and one member of Sigma Gamma Rho) who were interested in participating in the research study. Two of the women who participated initially also recommended chapter members from their respective organizations (two members of Delta Sigma Theta and one member of Sigma Gamma Rho), thus bringing the total to seven research participants. Communication with respondents occurred primarily through e-mail. When contacted, the respondent and I would select a date and time that was most convenient for the participant. Two days before each interview, a reminder e-mail was sent to the participant noting the interview date, time and campus location. All of the interviews were held in a small conference room located in the Black cultural center on main campus (See Chart 3.1, Research Study Timeline).
Individual Interviews

Each participant was interviewed using the Individual Interview Protocol and had the opportunity to share their personal experiences as both an African American woman at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and as a member of a Black Greek sorority (see Appendix D). The protocol consisted of questions that evolved out of the current literature and inquired about their pre- and in-college experiences and current educational and social experiences within the college setting. Likewise, some of my own knowledge about African American women, higher education and traditional, Black Greek sorority life were used in designing the interview questions.

Overall, the interview protocol was designed to create a “sisterly” conversation—a conversation in which the participant could speak openly and freely without judgment. The sequencing or patterning of questions sought to explore the participants’ child- and young adulthoods before, during and after college. The questions were constructed so that the participants could tell their life stories using their own voices. No questions were omitted during the individual interview or focus group phases. However, several questions were added after the first individual interview to the Individual Interview Protocol. The additional questions were revealed and contemplated during Michelle’s interview. Under the Family heading, a question concerning how research participants became aware of Black Greek life was added to provide insight into the experiences of other Black, Greek family members or friends who might have influenced the research participants’ decisions to join. Posing the additional questions also established if any of the research participants were legacies or the daughters of current sorority members.
Under the Sorority heading, additional questions that addressed the participants' parents' perceptions after joining, hazing, academic achievement and the importance of sororities to aspiring members were added as well. These specific questions would offer members' perspectives on the many challenges and dilemmas that continue to plague traditional, Black Greek life. As long as my follow-up inquiries did not alter or modify the original question or their responses, additional probing was allowed.

Typically, interviews lasted between one and a half hours to almost three hours. Before beginning the interview phase, the participant was greeted, reminded about the purpose of the research study and asked to sign a Statement of Consent form (see Appendix C). The consent form outlined the aforementioned information, as well as requested permission to tape record the interview. After the consent form was completed, the tape recorder was turned on and the interview began with questions about personal information (i.e., age, hometown or city). After each interview was conducted, the data was transcribed and provided to the participant for a member check. Schwandt (2001) suggests that a researcher may utilize member checks as another form of "validating or soliciting feedback" (p. 155). This timely process was another way for the participant to review her responses and as a means for me to ensure accuracy in the reporting of the data.

Several of the research participants were concerned about the length of the entire research process, particularly the individual interview phase. In an effort to assure the research participants of the importance of the study while ensuring their confidentiality, each participant was allowed to share their experiences until they felt that enough
personal information was provided. The research participants were also allowed to select a pseudonym that would be used throughout the individual interviews and focus group phases as well as in the final reporting of the data.

Additional concerns about safety and being in a comfortable environment were resolved by scheduling the interview phase at the university’s Black cultural center. I felt strongly that the cultural center provided a familiar setting as well as an adequate-sized conference room that was intimate enough for an individual interview.

**Focus Group**

During the second phase of the research process, participants came together and discussed various themes that surfaced during the individual interviews (See Appendix E). The focus group convened on a Saturday afternoon in April 2004 due to final examinations and Spring Break in March 2004. A convenient date was chosen after Spring Break by comparing the course schedules of the research participants. Consistent with the individual interview process, the design of the focus group was to create a “sisterly environment” where the research participants could discuss their personal and common experiences openly, without formal judgment. I hoped that a certain degree of self-reflection would encourage all to discuss their racial identity experiences. Participants were again reminded of the *Statement of Consent* form and their responses were tape-recorded. The group discussion focused primarily on issues concerning African American women, racial identity development, the importance of racial and cultural histories, family, faith, college attendance at PWIs and the similarities and differences between the four, traditional Black Greek sororities.
The focus group was held at the Black cultural center as well. Five participants (four members of Delta Sigma Theta and one member of Sigma Gamma Rho) joined in the one and a half hour group discussion. One participant, the member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, graduated in autumn 2003 and another member of Sigma Gamma Rho had a schedule conflict with her sorority's regional meeting.

3.4 Data Analysis

Both the individual interviews and the focus group were tape-recorded and transcribed. I also kept written notes of each participant's gestures, facial expressions and posture as a means to "visualize" their responses. Audiotapes were clearly labeled and separated by a manila envelope labeled with the date, time of interview and the pseudonym of each participant.

In order to prepare for the focus group phase, the individual interview audiotapes were transcribed for common themes and differences. Seidman (1998) maintains that tape recording accurately "preserves the words of the research participants" (p. 97). However, transcribing interview or focus group tapes can also be "time-consuming" (p. 98). I was aware of these demands; however, each tape was played for an initial gathering of the data, handwritten and then typed into a document. The typed responses were then compared to each participant's taped responses in order to ensure accuracy. The similarities and differences were then compared to the research questions, and coded or grouped accordingly. Coding is a process by which data is analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Pieces, or "excerpts" from the interviews or focus groups are placed into categories that have been "thematically organized" (Seidman, 1998, p. 107). By doing
this, the groupings of themes guided the questions that were posed during the focus group. Although a protocol and a set of questions already existed for the focus group, the original focus group questions were broad enough so that all of the important common themes could be explored without limitation. To ensure that each participant’s comments were paired with the correct pseudonym, table tents were placed in front of them. Participants also stated their self-selected name before each response. The final audiotape from the focus group was transcribed as well and compared to the research questions. Final categories of shared themes were determined and can be found in Chapter 4, Data Reporting and Chapter 5, Interpretation of the Data.

3.5 Soundness of the Study

Research and Sampling Bias

According to Schwandt (2001), a research bias is “something that interferes with, prevents or inhibits having true, genuine knowledge” (p. 16). The nature of this research study creates the possibility for research bias. I have been mindful to not let any of my personal biases enter into the research setting and was particularly concerned that four members of my own sorority populated this sample. I am a member of Delta Sigma Theta. However, it should be noted that the lack of participants from the other three sororities was either due to low membership numbers, an unwillingness to participate or an inactive status on campus.

By selecting participants through a snowball technique, questions may arise about the reliability of the data (Willie, 2003). There is also the “potential for inaccuracy in the
researcher's criteria and resulting sample selections" (Gay & Airasian, p. 115). As Seidman (1998) asserts, it is also likely that "the researcher's consciousness will play a major role in the interpretation of data" (p. 97). Likewise, the results coming out of the single, focus group may not be considered "hard data and representative of a larger population" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Trustworthiness**

While the aforementioned assertions may have some value, they were also taken into consideration when I decided to tape record and transcribe the data. This method of data collection ensured that I reported the findings as stated by each participant and that the "quality of the investigation" was of an utmost priority (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, as cited in Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). Likewise, by inviting all of the interviewees to participate in the focus group, members from three of the four traditional Black Greek sororities were represented and involved. The research literature suggests that a focus group should consist of eight to twelve members (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Unfortunately during the individual interview process, I learned that although there were members of Zeta Phi Beta on campus, the chapter was not currently active. Repeated attempts were also made to include more members of Alpha Kappa Alpha in the research study; however, several members were preparing for autumn graduation and did not desire to participate.
**Generalizability**

In reference to this particular study, researching just African American women who belong to traditional Black Greek sororities at PWIs will certainly prevent the results from being generalized to all African American women who attend similar universities or colleges. This is particularly true because many women who desire to join such organizations are never extended the invitation. The aim of this research study was to capture a “snap-shot” of the participants’ collegiate experiences, rather than to generalize to an entire population. Gay and Airasian (2003) suggest that in qualitative research, “the intent is to describe a particular context in depth, not to generalize to a context or population” (p. 116). Honing in on the value of the participants’ life experiences is essential to this research inquiry. Seidman (1998) maintains that the best way to understand a collective group is “through the experience of the individual people, the “others” who make up the organization or carry out the process” (p. 4). Thus, my goal was to be immersed within this specific sub-culture that possessed a unique blend of shared race, gender, sisterhood and community.

**Researcher Bias and Sensitivity**

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), research sensitivity “refers to the attribute of having insight, ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand and capability to separate the pertinent from what isn’t” (p. 42). Being vested heavily in the literature as well as in his or her own research participants may “sensitize” the researcher to what is “going on with the phenomena” (p. 42). While personal and professional
experience with the research topic may be of some value, the researcher must take caution and not assume that the participants’ experiences will mirror his or her own life experiences.

I am passionate about the experiences of undergraduate African American women who decide to pursue higher education. I was reared in a family that valued the benefits of a college education including the participation in various clubs and organizations. Like many of the young women who participated in this research study, I was introduced to traditional Black Greek life through family members who either belonged to one of the four organizations or had close ties to them. In my immediate family, my mother, paternal grandmother, paternal aunts and maternal and paternal cousins are all members of Delta Sigma Theta. Throughout my primary and secondary years, I participated in enrichment programs sponsored by Sigma Gamma Rho, Zeta Phi Beta and Delta Sigma Theta. In preparation for college, I had also visited a number of universities and attended probate or “coming out” shows and step exhibitions. My fascination with Black Greek life only grew when I entered my undergraduate institution in the fall of 1994. By the fall of 1995, I was prepared to move towards womanhood when I was initiated along with 39 other line sisters into my sorority. My life changed after being initiated into the largest service organization serving African American women. To join the ranks of other successful and notable African American women caused me to hold myself to a higher academic standard, as well as encouraged me to be a student leader on campus. Although I believe that the young women in this study express similar sentiments, they have also taken different life paths. As I have heard the personal narratives of each participant, I
have seen myself in them—collectively, the participants are young, African American, female and ambitious.

Because I had both personal knowledge of and professional experience with the research topic, I enacted two procedures to prevent researcher bias: peer debriefing and journaling. Peer debriefing can be helpful in using a “trusted and knowledgeable colleague as a sounding-board for one or more purposes” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 188). I held regular meetings with my thesis advisor in order to separate out my views and perceptions from those of the research participants. Keeping a written journal also aided me in a significant amount of self-reflection. Likewise enrolling in counseling and diversity courses during the autumn of 2003 allowed me to acquire active listening skills and understand racial and gender identity development from many different perspectives.

Confidentiality

It should also be noted that participants (during both the interview and focus group phases) were treated with the utmost confidentiality and at no time during the research process were their birth names used. Each participant had the opportunity to assume a pseudonym for reporting purposes. All of the collected data was maintained off-campus, labeled and locked in a file cabinet. Upon the conclusion and grading of the research study, all of the audiotapes and written notes will be destroyed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
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<td>Review Board (HSRB)</td>
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<td>October 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2004</td>
<td>Conducted six interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2004</td>
<td>Conducted focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2004</td>
<td>Completed research study</td>
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*Table 3.1  Research Study Timeline*
CHAPTER 4

DATA REPORTING

Chapter 4 outlines and highlights the participants' demographic and individual profiles as well as the themes that evolved from the individual interviews and focus group discussion. Each of the young women who participated in this research study was unique in their own right and defied any "one size, fit all" description of an undergraduate, African American woman. Although Chapter 5 interprets the research data and common themes in depth, understanding the participants' educational and social experiences or brief "snapshots" of their lives not only provides an incredible amount of diverse voices and perspectives, but reinforces the notion that different types of women with a wide range of personal and professional aspirations seek membership in traditional, Black Greek sororities.

4.1 Group Profile (See Chart 4.1, Group Profile of Research Participants)

The research participants' ages ranged from 20 to 23. Both Michele and Caliya were the youngest and from Cleveland, Ohio and Washington, DC respectively. Shaunte, a graduating senior, was the oldest and a native of Columbus, Ohio.
Two other research participants also hailed from the state of Ohio: Michelle was from Akron and Kim was from Youngstown. Ontario, California was where Janet called home and Lynn was born in Chicago, Illinois.

Four of the participants registered as seniors. Michele, Lynn and Caliya were of junior status. Michelle graduated from the university in December 2003. Shaunte was the only research participant preparing for a spring 2004 graduation.

Six of the research participants identified as full-time students. Twenty-three year old Shaunte was the only part-time student. She attributed this status to her completing several courses in preparation for spring quarter graduation. Besides the one alumna, Michelle, Shaunte was the only research participant scheduled to graduate in June 2004.

With the exception of Lynn, Michelle and Caliya, all of the other young women will complete their undergraduate degrees in five years. Janet will complete her program in Integrated Social Studies in autumn 2005, while Kim, Caliya and Lynn will prepare to graduate in spring 2005. Michele, the twenty-year old Visual Communications major, anticipated a spring 2006 graduation from the university.

The young women who participated in this study were quite diverse in terms of the majors they were pursuing. Lynn, who originally began her matriculation as a pre-Physical Therapy major, decided to change and pursue Human Development and Family Science when she realized that “somebody’s bones and having to look at injuries and blood” did not appeal to her anymore. Janet decided to pursue Integrated Social Studies because she wanted to become a schoolteacher, while Michelle envisioned her future as a business entrepreneur. Additional majors in the research study included Visual
Communications, Political Science/Journalism, Communications/Computer Science and Textiles and Clothing.

*Local Sorority History (See Chart 4.2, National and Local Black Greek Sorority Profile)*

The history of each of the traditionally, Black Greek sororities was rich and quite interesting given that two of the four organizations on this particular campus were single-letter chapters. Black Greek sororities are designated by three Greek letters (i.e. ΑΚΑ, ΔΣΘ, ΣΓΡ and ΖΦΒ). The creation of the organizations' first collegiate chapters were named appropriately, Alpha Chapters. Collegiate chapters that were established thereafter assumed the next Greek-letter until the entire alphabet was exhausted. Once an Omega Chapter (the last Greek-letter alphabet) was designated, the next chapter assumed a double, Greek-lettered title (i.e. Alpha Alpha, Alpha Beta). Two of the Black sororities on this campus were among the first undergraduate chapters to be established within their national organizations' Greek-nomenclature. Given that three of the Black sororities were founded on HBCU campuses, it may be surprising that single-lettered chapters were even established on predominantly White campuses; however, they were not a rarity.

According to Giddings (1988), there was a dire need to establish Black Greek sororities at PWIs in the early and mid 1900's. African American women “suffered from the all too familiar refrain of discrimination because of their gender as well as their color” (p. 75). Young women who aspire to be members at this institution are joining collegiate chapters with admirable histories and traditions.
Alpha Kappa Alpha, founded nationally in 1908 on the campus of Howard University, was the first sorority to be created for African American women. Michelle, the only AKA to participate, was a member of the Theta Chapter. Four of the research participants were members of Delta Sigma Theta (Epsilon Chapter). In terms of physical members, the Epsilon Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta is the largest sorority on campus. It was the fifth chapter to be established in its national sorority's nomenclature structure and the first, Black Greek sorority to be chartered at this large, Research-I University in 1919. Both Caliya and Lynn were members of Sigma Gamma Rho (Delta Phi Chapter). Founded nationally in 1922, Sigma Gamma Rho was the last of the Black Greek sororities to be created on this campus in 1971.

4.2 Individual Profiles

Michelle

According to Michelle, being an African American woman is “not easy and a complicated thing to be.” Reared in predominantly White neighborhoods, she learned early on how to navigate and manage her Black home life in contrast with her daily encounters in a majority White learning environment. While growing up in Akron, Ohio she became involved actively in extra-curricular activities and community-affiliated organizations. Michelle also sought out mentorships through her mother and an African American businesswoman who have epitomized what it means to have “overcome the odds.”

While enrolled at the university, she has taken advantage of campus resources that were designed to attract and retain students of color including being the recipient of a full
scholarship from the Young Scholars Program (a scholarship program sponsored by the Office of Minority Affairs (OMA). When asked to describe her interests in joining one of the traditional Black Greek sororities, Michelle cited the personal influences of a past cheerleading coach and a university staff member who were members of her sorority. She was attracted to Alpha Kappa Alpha because it was “rich with history and women who have been about something.” Because she does not have a biological sister, joining her sorority has allowed her to establish meaningful relationships with other like-minded, Black women.

Michele

Michele, one of the two youngest research participants, shared similar sentiments. From the very beginning, Michele spoke about the importance of family and how it was pertinent that she selected the same institution as her older brother. She stated that being an African American woman at a PWI required her to be “strong;” but also able to balance “multiple roles.” Her interactions with OMA and a professional mentor have enabled her to succeed educationally and socially. Michele’s introduction to Black Greek Life came by way of her brother’s initiation into Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated, the second, traditional Black Greek fraternity created for African American men. His love for and dedication to his organization inspired her to seek membership in Delta Sigma Theta. She viewed the sorority’s mission and programmatic commitments as a means to “help her through life” because of the amount of “sisterhood and community service” that was involved. Like many of the research participants, she planned to remain active in her
sorority by joining an alumnae chapter (also commonly referred to as a graduate chapter) upon graduation.

**Kim**

Kim was the third research participant to be interviewed. Although Kim was interested initially in attending an HBCU (she was accepted at Spelman College, Howard University and Hampton University), she enrolled at an institution that would allow her to be close to family. Unlike any of the other research participants, her parents attended this same institution, but did not have favorable experiences. When asked to explain, she commented:

> Because, they attended, you know, in the early seventies. Just right out of the Civil Rights Movement.

Kim’s experiences at the university have been defined largely by her ability to get involved. She has been able to find and locate “safety nets” which have included participating in events in the Black cultural center and joining her sorority. When not pursuing a major in Political Science and Journalism, she has found time to serve as a sorority officer. Consistent with her personal philosophy of finding safety nets, Kim viewed her membership in her sorority as another “support system.” Although Kim has a biological sister, she also yearned for the additional sense of sisterhood among African American women that the sorority has provided.

**Shaunte**

Shaunte, the eldest of the group, provided additional insight into this group of diverse and unique African American women. Similar to some of the other women, she
chose to attend this university because it offered her a financial scholarship. Shaunte’s positive sense of self, in terms of a racial identity, has occurred because she has immersed herself in her ethnic and cultural histories. She also felt that faith had assisted her in defining who she is because both her mother and father are ministers.

While other research participants have categorized African American women as being “strong” and “complex,” Shaunte added another layer by suggesting that Black women are “soulful, although society makes both their race and gender negative.” Overall, being enrolled in college has allowed her to “mature.” Her membership in Delta Sigma Theta has only reinforced this personal growth.

**Lynn**

Lynn cited numerous life events and experiences that have contributed to how she viewed herself in terms of her racial identity development. Lynn was reared in the inner city of Chicago and lived in predominantly African American neighborhoods all of her life. Lynn commented that it had been difficult to separate out her “Blackness” from her “woman-ness” because it “depended on the situation”:

> When you are with a bunch of African Americans, it is not like, ‘Oh, you are African American.’ If you are talking to a bunch of African American males, you are going to take the woman standpoint on what you know. It just varies from different situations.

At the same, she also acknowledged that being among only a limited number of African Americans on campus could be difficult at times. She too has sought assistance from OMA and the services of a professional mentor who was suggested through the office’s extensive network of professional mentors. Participation in her sorority has also allowed
her to feel “more grown up” and encouraged her “to learn my history.” She also advocated for other African American women to explore Black Greek life because it has been “a great experience.”

**Janet**

Janet brought a distinctive quality to the research environment: she is bi-racial. Janet’s mother was African American and her father was Irish American. The wording and syntax of many of the research questions had to be restructured during the interview process to accommodate Janet so that she would feel comfortable in responding. When she was asked to describe how she sees herself in terms of her racial identity, she commented:

> I would say that I identify more with the African American side of my heritage because that is how society sees me. For the most part, people don’t look at me and think I am White, they think that I am African American.

As the interview progressed, it was obvious that racial identity development had been an area that has caused great pain for “Janet.” However, she found solace in her close relationship with her parents and brother and through her membership in Delta Sigma Theta. When asked to address the importance of joining a sorority, she offered several explanations including the opportunities to develop life-long friendships and a sense of sisterhood and being able to participate in campus programming. Janet has also been able to build personal and professional skills like “public speaking and interacting with different types of people.”
Caliya

A commitment to faith and her racial heritage have shaped Caliya as an African American woman. However, securing a sense of self as a child was challenged by a number of encounters:

I went to predominantly White schools.  
I knew I was not like everyone else.  
God forbid, if a racial issue came up; everyone would look at me like the ‘token, Black girl.’

Attending this particular university has “heightened” her level of self and racial pride as well as encouraged her to explore her racial history more by enrolling in ethnic-themed courses. Her membership in Sigma Gamma Rho has also allowed her to appreciate the active role her organization assumes in the African American community. Because of her organization’s commitment, Caliya discouraged potential members from pursuing membership for all of the wrong reasons: popularity, “stepping” and just “wearing some letters.”

4.3 Racial Identity Development

Defining a Racial Identity

The discussion of racial identity development produced results that were just as diverse as the educational and social experiences of the Black women who participated in this study. The actual process of thinking about how the research participants have come to know “self” in terms of race and even gender was complex and difficult at times because numerous factors have been involved in their identity formation processes.
Likewise, some of the research participants connected physical characteristics (i.e. skin color, hair texture) or historical references to their definitions of a racial self.

When asked specifically to define racial identity development or racial identity formation four of the responses included:

I guess racial identity is finding out who you are, and it is not necessarily just an external thing like your skin color, it is more. It has to do with your feelings, like your history and background.

I don’t really think about, like race. I think more about culture and just knowing where you come from.

I guess how you identify yourself based on race, and if you are socialized in a certain way to have that identity.

To me, racial identity development is how you come to know about your culture and how you view yourself in that culture. How you embrace and practice it, all of those things determine who you are.

Two other research participants offered definitions through examples:

For instance, a kindergartner getting to know who they are, learning their family origins and who and what they are to become.

Where I come from, race is Black or White. I am not White, so I am Black. And then in terms of growing up, I wasn’t trying to identify as Black. I was just trying to identify as you know, the children who were around me, and they were White.

The definition of a racial identity also included physical descriptions of what it means to be Black or African American. For instance, Caliya commented that she was Black because of her “brown skin.” Michele’s understanding of race, as a physical
characteristic, was often the result of her Black friends taunting her about her light skin although she saw herself "as a Black person period, no matter the shade or anything." Janet was the only research participant who identified as bi-racial. An alternative description that she sometimes used to describe herself was "mixed." She admitted that at first glance individuals often mistook her for being solely African American.

**Developing a Racial Identity**

Developing a racial self has also been influenced by the research participants' life experiences prior to and during their college enrollments. Learning about the Black experience in America from her family members aided Caliya in her development of a positive racial identity. Having been reared in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools, Michelle and Shaunte's experiences were similar. Michelle understood that she was "different" racially from her peers while Shaunte was often considered the "token Black student" in her advanced classes. Because their families were involved in their lives outside of the learning environment, Michelle and Shaunte were able to construct a positive racial identity: Michelle through involvement in extra-curricular activities and Shaunte through reading African American literature. Specifically, both of the young women's relationships with their mothers ensured that they identified positively with the history of Blacks Americans.

Although she liked to consider herself an "open" individual who focused on individuals' similarities rather than differences, Michele acknowledged that she had experienced negative situations related to being the only African American in her college courses. Being one of the few African Americans in her courses had caused Lynn to
become more defensive in her interactions with members of the majority culture. Whites either expected her to be the “token African American” or the “frustrated, African American woman.” When asked to explain what these two categorizations meant, she stated:

When you are talking to White people, they expect you to be the speaker for the whole Black race. I can’t speak for everybody. I get frustrated because I try to explain and be as civil as possible, but they are still like, ‘I just don’t get it’ and I am like, ‘You will never understand’.

While developing a racial identity had been similar for several of the research participants, it was obviously the most difficult for Janet. Throughout her individual interview, Janet confirmed that she still did “not have a concrete idea of what her racial identity was.” She recalled countless incidents where she had to insist on her categorical affiliation with either her African American or Irish American heritages without success. For instance in sixth grade, a teacher dismissed her claim that she was both Black and White since she appeared to be African American, although Janet repeatedly informed the teacher that her parents were different racially. Even within her social circles of primarily African American peers, she has had to defend her Irish American heritage, particularly stressing that not all White people are the same:

Like I hear comments, ‘White people get on my nerves and they are so racist’ and all this kind of stuff. That is the only thing that bothers me when they just try to put White people in one group. Like my dad’s family is not like that.
Being Black and a Woman

While many of the definitions of racial identity focused on past and current incidents as well as physical descriptions, several of the research participants offered unique perspectives when gender was introduced into the discussion. The research participants agreed that society expected African American women to be "strong" and "the backbone of the family." Others felt as though Black women were "not allowed to show their emotions," oftentimes "disrespected" or a complete "contradiction." When asked to describe her racial identity Kim stated that she was "Black first, and then a woman." The researcher continued to inquire about why she selected this particular ordering of words and she responded:

If I am going to be a representation of my demographic group, then I am going to be the best that I can be. When people look at me and they see Black, they don't expect much from me. But once I do come at them, eager to learn and with a desire to achieve, it is surprising to them.

For Kim, being a Black woman meant that she could be intelligent, composed and "strong" although her experiences within the learning environment suggested otherwise.

Again, when pressed to explain Kim suggested that she was often unfairly stereotyped:

In terms of encountering people on this campus, especially White males, it is like, 'You are great, but you are so bitchy.' Why can't I have a dominant opinion, but not come across as having an attitude?
Kim's positive and negative descriptions of being an African American woman are consistent with the other research participants, including Janet. When asked why she thought that some African American women were reluctant to show their emotions, Janet maintained that it comes at a "great cost" for them to do so. Needing clarification, the researcher asked Janet to comment on her statement and she responded:

"It is not always easy being strong, and you shouldn't always have to be strong. You should be able to ask for help, and that is always perceived as a weakness."

Lynn believed that choosing between being an African American or woman first depended on the situation or environment. For instance, if an African American female were engaging in a conversation with an African American male she might be more likely to "take the woman standpoint," whereas, if she were interacting with individuals of another race she might claim her racial heritage. While Lynn advocated that the situation or environment dictated the identity that a Black woman might assume first, she also suggested that race and gender are a contradiction for Black women. Lynn provided the following explanation:

Like, they want African American women to be strong, and able to take whatever. But there are those that think if you are a woman, you are supposed to be weak and mild. If you stand up for yourself, then you are not being ladylike. I think that you have to have good balance in certain situations to put up with it.
4.4 Education, Family and Race

*Education is the Key*

The pursuit and value of a college education has been stressed throughout each of the young women’s lives. All seven of the research participants suggested that both immediate and extended family members had, had the greatest influence in encouraging them to pursue higher education. Michele’s biggest influence was the result of her older brother attending the same institution. Michelle and Shaunte cited primarily the influence of their mothers as to why they have enrolled at an institution of higher education. Because both research participants were raised by single-mothers who were employed full-time, attending college for them was almost a duty or an act of respect for their own mothers’ love and commitment. Shaunte commented:

I feel like my mom is the reason why I am the way that I am. She pushed education on us so much, there was never the doubt in my mind that I would not go to college.

Shaunte goes on to mention that unlike her high school peers, who were rewarded financially for excellent grades and academic honors, those types of achievements were natural expectations from her mother. Although the thought of being rewarded financially sounded promising, her mother made it very clear that doing well now, meant being successful later:

There is a requirement to do the best that I can. To get the best grades so that I could have a scholarship so I could go to college, and it was just something that was known in my house that I was going to college.
In the same manner as Shaunte’s mother, Michelle’s mother had always been
direct with her about what was expected academically. Michelle fondly remembered her
mother reminding her constantly that, “If you want it bad enough, you know, not just a
college degree, it is up to you to go and get it.” Michelle understood that she was the
“only person” who could stop herself from doing that.

Although her parents did not “necessarily tell her that she had to go to college,”
Lynn’s commitment to higher education paid homage to them in every educational
decision that she makes. Lynn shared that she had an older brother and sister who
enrolled in college but did not complete their matriculation due to financial and academic
reasons. However, Lynn felt an obligation to her parents to make them aware that they
“didn’t screw up in raising us.” Even when she has become “unmotivated” in her studies,
Lynn finds a way to re-connect with them:

They always stay in my head. When I am taking
a test, and I am trying not to study as much as
I need too, they just start inching up from the
back of my brain.

Kim, Caliya and Janet’s experiences were not too different although their
orientation with higher education was not just limited to parental influence, but also
considered the opinions of extended family members. Caliya credited her grandmother,
who was a Latin teacher, for exposing her to the importance of an education. Likewise,
both of her parents attended college and were very “education-oriented.” In Janet’s
family it was “unacceptable to not get your degree.” Kim also learned this exact
sentiment early in life. Because her grandparents and parents finished college, not
attending an institution of higher education was never an option. Kim was also aware that
her educational journey would not cease when she had obtained her undergraduate
degree:

Like my sister is in medical school.
It is just assumed that until you reach
the highest level degree in your academic
field, you are not done.

Kim’s expectations of pursuing a professional degree after completing her undergraduate
degree is a goal that she will achieve and one that is being supported definitely by her
entire family. Citing the example of an older aunt who just finished her Ph.D. in
education, Kim has taken heed of the advice she was offered: “If you just keep going
right after college, it is so much easier.”

Matters of Race

How the families of each of the seven participants’ parents or family members
dealt with race varied; however, each of the young women were able to point out specific
examples and common experiences that caused them to consider race during their
childhoods. For instance, both Caliya and Janet commented that race what not discussed
often in their families; however, they were able to provide concrete examples of how race
was confronted while growing up. Although Caliya had been raised in predominantly
White neighborhoods and had grown accustomed to interacting with White children,
oftimes she did inquire as to why her parents always “had to move us out here”. While
she enjoyed the White friends that she had made she also longed for friends that were
African American:

Sometimes, you just want to be
around people that are like you, and you
know, aren’t going to ask you questions like, “Ooh, what is that in your hair?”
You get tired of explaining all of the time.

Janet’s parents seemingly took a hands-off approach to the race question although she contemplated her bi-racial identity as it confronted in her daily interactions with other children. When asked why, Janet commented that her parents were more concerned with “showing her love” and the need for her to be “open-minded.” But while her parents were equipping her with the personal and social skills that they thought she needed, Janet’s daily experiences that were not under the guidance of her parents were very different. For example, she cited an incident when she first noticed that the marital arrangement between her Black mother and her White father unnerved some people. She also shared that when she was born, the doctor was reluctant to turn her over to her mother “because we looked so different, like they didn’t think that I was her’s.” Janet stated throughout her interview that race and defining “who she was” in terms of her ethnicity has been a lifelong struggle. Because she has found her mother to be quite sensitive about the race issue, oftentimes her family as a whole would not talk to each other, preferring to “avoid conflict at any costs.”

Matters of race for the other five young women have been experienced through the lives of their parents, their physical surroundings and involvement in civic and social organizations. Lynn alluded to the fact that her father had always been “big on the race thing” while Michele’s rearing in an all-Black neighborhood differed from her interracial experiences in high school. Shaunte’s mother ensured that her daughter was content with who she was racially by purchasing “Black dolls and books by African American authors
that were about her Black heritage.” Because Michelle and Kim often confronted race in
the learning setting, their mothers were instrumental in getting them involved in
enrichment activities and civic and social organizations that reinforced their racial
heritage. Michelle stated:

My mother always knew there were going to be
some challenges that I might have faced
being in a predominantly White school and
having White teachers. I got involved in the
Urban Black Woman Leadership Junior Council
to bring me around more Black women.

Kim’s educational experiences were similar in that she too was one of the few
students of color at the schools she attended. Kim comes from a privileged background
and her interaction with African Americans, up until college, had been limited. Her
mother was aware of this limitation and got her involved in Jack and Jill of America, an
African American social organization that had been in existence since 1938. According to
Graham (2000), Jack and Jill serves primarily as an organization for professional African
American families to engage in educational, social and networking activities.
Membership is sought and granted through the family’s mother. But while Kim’s mother
wanted to expose her to Black children who were from similar financial and educational
backgrounds, her mother also enrolled her in the local Boys and Girls Club. When asked
why this was important, Kim commented:

Because she wanted us to realize that like,
there are two sides and we hope that one
day, everyone can be on the side that you
are on.
At a young age, Kim had to deal with both her family’s financial influence and how she was being perceived in an all-White learning environment. While she was able to see how Blacks lived on both sides of the track, Kim was still one of the few Blacks at predominantly White schools. Being “Black” did not escape her. She made this point all the more relevant when she stated:

I would come home and be like, “None of the other kids will play with me… My parents would respond, “Well, they don’t want to play with you because you are Black.” It is hard for someone so young to understand.

*Family and Black Greek Life*

To some degree, all but two of the young women had informal or formal introductions to Black Greek life, prior to enrolling, through the membership of family members, family acquaintances or through social activities and events. Not only was Michelle the first member of Alpha Kappa Alpha in her family, but she was also the first Black Greek as well. Shaunte was also the first member of her family to go Greek. Although not unfamiliar entirely with Black Greek life, Shaunte cited two television shows that introduced her to the world of Black fraternities and sororities: *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*. She later learned that her Godmother was a member of Delta Sigma Theta.

Michele’s initial contact with Black Greek life came by way of her brother’s membership in Omega Psi Phi, an African American fraternity founded in 1911 on the campus of Howard University. In the same manner, Caliya’s maternal grandmother and eldest sister were Deltas. Her grandfather was an Omega as well.
At the age of twelve, Janet was able to attend a national conference or Boule with her aunt, who was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. She also had an uncle who was a member of Kappa Alpha Psi. Lynn credited her father with exposing her to Black Greek life when he would take her family to the annual Circle City Classis in Indianapolis, Indiana each year. She commented that he would purchase tickets to the step shows and “made sure that I got real close to the stage.” Those instances provided Lynn with unforgettable images that still resonate with her today:

I remember being so mesmerized. 
I didn’t even know they were about community service back then... They were like giants just stepping away, flipping and rolling around. 

Lynn would later learn that there were some distant Black Greeks in her family including an uncle who was an Omega and several aunts who were members of Zeta Phi Beta, Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Kim was the only legacy or the daughter of a current member (of the same organization) interviewed. Her initiation into the world of Black Greeks occurred because her maternal aunt was a member of Sigma Gamma Rho, her grandmother’s sister was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha and her maternal grandmother is a Delta. Likewise, many of the professional Black women that she interacted with in Jack and Jill were members of Black Greek organizations, primarily Delta Sigma Theta.

4.5 The Influence of Role Models and Mentors

All seven young women commented on the individual who had the most significant impact on their lives and were able to cite the importance of having a
relationship with him or her. The presence of role models or mentors in the research participants' lives has provided opportunities for meaningful interaction and engagement. Role models and mentors have offered personal and professional guidance, and gaining an appreciation for them has occurred through constant communication and personal involvement. The data suggest that the individuals who were selected as role models tended to be female relatives, while mentors were more likely to be professional and career-oriented men or women. Caliya was the only exception, citing a male acquaintance with whom she had shared a relationship.

**Female Relatives as Role Models**

Five research participants suggested that their mothers were their role models. Michelle, Michele, Shaunte, Kim and Janet provided similar perspectives on how their mothers were instrumental in shaping and molding who they were as individuals. Michele commented that she and her mother share similar personality characteristics, which have become more evident as she has progressed through life. In the same manner, Michelle’s admiration for her mother had resulted from seeing her “overcome the odds” and in “being honest, steadfast, faithful and loving.” Shaunte also echoed similar sentiments:

> From just seeing her handle, you know, the things that confronted her and to be able to raise two young children on her own and the obstacles that she has overcome in life, she just, she has had the most impact on me.
Her mother’s influence also encouraged her to strive for academic excellence, suggesting that there was “nothing wrong with a woman or an African American woman being smart.”

Kim’s parents’ separation when she was a child resulted in her mother serving as her first example of a strong, African American woman. She noted that her mother had completed her college degree while raising two young daughters. Particularly, Kim has always appreciated her mother’s competitive spirit and for instilling that same quality in her. Janet also stated that her sense of self was strengthened by her mother’s ability to de-emphasize Janet’s external appearance while emphasizing her internal qualities and strengths. Janet felt a personal responsibility to not “burden” her mother anymore than what was necessary; however, her mother was quite aware of Janet’s personal and physical appearance struggles and able to put them in perspective for her:

> Even when I personally felt like an ugly duckling or whatever, she told me that I was beautiful and she just really instilled, like even though I didn’t always have this confidence, she always tried to make me have a high self-esteem.

While Lynn could have named a number of role models in her family, she preferred to discuss her maturing relationship with her older sister. Her older sibling is her role model “in sort of an adverse way.” Unlike the mothers who were mentioned for their abilities to inspire and persevere, Lynn recognized the personal deficiencies of her sister while growing up and learned valuable lessons from them that she was able to apply to her own life:

> I have learned so much just by watching my sister mess up and you know, she is getting
pretty level-headed now, but I really think that her trials and tribulations saved me when I was younger.

When asked further about how her older sister had assisted in shaping who she was, Lynn commented:

She can be real conniving and manipulative. In a lot of ways, she has helped me see, like the things that I don’t like in people. So I try to keep those characteristics as far away from my personality as possible.

As both of the women have grown older, Lynn’s relationship with her sister has matured. Because Lynn’s sister is enlisted in the military, oftentimes she will be sent to a new base or shipped off for duty. Lynn has learned to take advantage of the time they have together by speaking with her on a regular basis. Their relationship has grown because both have been committed to each other and they have been able to reconcile their past relationship by focusing on their present one. Lynn summed it up best when she suggested, “She got her problems, but Lord knows, I love her.”

Professional Men and Women as Mentors

Three of the research participants also cited the importance of professional mentors. Michelle discussed the professional relationship she had established with an African-American female business executive employed by a national insurance company. She commented that although her professional mentor only possessed a bachelor’s degree she had been able to ascend up the corporate ladder to become one of the highest-ranking African Americans in Corporate America. Michelle’s admiration for her professional mentor was the result of learning about her life story and the professional goals she
established from the very beginning of her career. Similar to Michelle, Michele’s professional relationship with her OMA mentor, an African American professor in her major, had allowed her to secure a solid footing within her academic program:

He helped me to get into the program, because it is really a hard program to get into. He helps a lot of the Black kids, because there are not a lot of them in the program.

Being exposed to the “phenomenal women” of Jack and Jill has assisted in reinforcing a sense of self for Kim. Having the opportunity to engage with members on a more personal level allowed her to interact with “professors, lawyers and doctors” who have “set the ground work for up and coming Black women.” One member in particular, who was also a member of Kim’s sorority, offered a contrast to her own mother’s personal demeanor. Whereas her mother had been competitive and aggressive in her accomplishments, this African American woman provided a “happy medium” since she “was a little more reserved.” By comparing two prominent women in her life Kim had been able to model those behaviors that are of personal and professional value to her.

The presence of role models and mentors in the lives of the research participants has been significant. One research participant credited her personal growth as an individual to her maturing relationship with her older sister. For five undergraduate women, mothers have been the ultimate example of inspiration, perseverance and steadfastness. Likewise, research participants’ mothers have been able to rise above their past circumstances to achieve success while instilling the necessary values of self-esteem and competitiveness in their daughters. In the same manner, professional mentors have
added an additional layer of confidence by serving as examples and resources while offering career guidance.

4.6 The Influence of Faith and Religion

The data suggested that although faith and religion had been a significant part of the research participants' upbringings, practicing a specific faith, religion or attending church had become more of a personal choice since arriving at college. All of the young women identified as Christians and were members of the Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal or African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) faiths. Caliya was the only research participant to attend a predominantly White faith institution during her childhood. Kim and Michele had also attended Catholic schools growing up.

Church Attendance

The extent to which the research participants attended church, both past and present, varied widely. Throughout her life, Michelle has found the church to be another "support system" and a place where she can "connect spiritually." However, several of the other research participants commented that when they were younger, being involved in or going to their home churches was more of a family requirement, and at times felt "forced." Janet shared this sentiment and explained to her father at the age of twelve that she did not want to go to church anymore. When asked why she arrived at this decision at such a young age, she informed the researcher that she was not sure that "faith had really, strongly shaped me." The researcher pressed Janet further about this latter statement.
because Janet admitted, “God was a main force in my life;” however she did not see the
need to connect her relationship with God by attending an institution of faith:

I definitely believe in God and Jesus, but at
this time, I don’t know. It wouldn’t be honest. I try
to put it in God’s hands and not to try to run my
life. I don’t know, by not going to church, that is not
my focus, that’s not unfortunately.

Janet’s beliefs continue to factor in her decision to not attend church on a regular basis,
although she has had more personal success when she attends an A.M.E. church back
home.

Although her mother had been raised in the church and was accustomed to
attending church every Sunday, Kim considered herself more of a “Christmas Eve or
Easter girl.” The Sunday church ritual was not stressed in her home although her mother
ensured that “God and Jesus was a part of our lives.” Her mother’s persistence has
resonated with Kim because there are certain “things” that she will not do, including
being a “promiscuous woman” or “doing drugs.” Kim commented that she not only has
an “obligation to herself” but also an “obligation to him.” Lynn’s faith experiences
almost mirror Kim’s in that her family was not involved actively in the church, but that
her own relationship with God had prevented her engaging and participating in self-
destructive behavior. Her acceptance of God and Christianity was not the result of her
parent’s encouragement, but rather a personal journey in which she gained an incredible
amount of respect for God and herself:

I think it kept me from doing a lot of things.
You know when I was in high school, there
were at least four people pregnant every year.
People had parties all the time. I just
think when you have a certain amount of respect for yourself, when you have Christian beliefs, you just have that sense of respect for self even more. And, so you hold yourself in a different way.

**Faith Just Does Not Fit**

Several of the young women struggled with fitting in or including faith in their lives; however, they were aware that faith is something that they needed to re-commit to and practice more. While attending church physically had not been a priority for six of the research participants, being grounded in and having a relationship with a higher being was. Troubling or adverse situations over the past years had caused two respondents to depend more on a personal relationship with God. When she experienced “rough times” or was “going through something,” Caliya suggested that she grew closer to God:

> When you go through adversity and things like that, your faith becomes stronger because you realize that you need him in order to get through and without him, probably wouldn’t.

She has come to view her relationship with God as an “outlet.” Praying to him during difficult situations has allowed her to acknowledge that she cannot complete daily tasks without his guidance, and when she “lets go of them, then all the good things can come into her life.”

Michele would agree, stating that she preferred having a “one-on-one” relationship with God because when she prayed to him in solitude she felt like “everything went better.” The recent illness of her mother and the death of her grandfather have encouraged her to seek a place of worship even more. She shared that
she had joined a church in her hometown and became baptized. Likewise, she was “glad
that she found her way” because as her mother’s illness became more serious, her daily
prayers increased:

I prayed that she would not die. I prayed a lot.
And, he gave me a miracle and he healed her.

Prayer and an individual relationship with God had enabled Michele to locate a local
church in the university area so that her connection to him could continue to develop and
grow.

Having parents who were also ministers has presented an interesting spiritual
journey for Shaunte. Her relationship with a higher being has ended up where others and
she would have least expected. Since arriving at the university and taking both an
Anthropology and Ethics course, she has lost her connection to her faith. When asked
what brought about her change in perspective she commented:

Some of the things that I was experiencing was taking
me away from a lot of the things that I was taught. It is
something that I can always rely on because I can go back
to. I guess right now, I choose not to. Right now, my faith is
not very strong.

Race and Religion

When asked about whether or not faith had influenced their racial selves, Caliya
acknowledged that her relationship with God had shaped who she was an African
American woman. She recalled a statement that her mother often shared with her:

As a Black woman, I have to be, you know, ten
times stronger than every White person and then
ten times stronger than every man.
Caliya has come to internalize this statement and utilize it when she confronts new challenges.

Encountering new challenges has also assisted Janet in her racial identity formation. Leaving behind her family’s Catholic church where a majority of the members were Caucasian and attending an A.M.E. church where the congregation was predominantly African American opened her up to “different” perspectives. As an African American female, faith has provided Michelle with hope. For instance, she stated that people always commented to her that she was very driven and goal-oriented. She often replied to those individuals that her behavior was the result of her “having hope” and that was because of her belief in faith.

Lynn, Janet and Michelle were the only research participants who stated that their faith institutions celebrated or acknowledged their racial heritage by sponsoring designated programs or events. Lynn’s church recognized Black History Month while Michelle’s church hosted an annual Black College Tour for high school students. The A.M.E. church Janet attended celebrated Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is the African American holiday and tradition that is celebrated usually during the last calendar week of December (www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org.). This response was interesting given that three other research participants attended predominantly Black churches. Perhaps acknowledging the congregation’s racial heritage was not an oversight but rather an assumption that was understood since the majority of the members were African American. As Michele suggested:

There is no way to really put a name on it because we are all Black, and you know we are
going to be together if they have something.

Although some Black churches may have yet to embrace an Afrocentric perspective, both Lynn and Shaunte agreed that the historical experiences of African Americans in this country have been and should continue to be rooted in faith. Shaunte suggested that Blacks may have had a “horribly plight here on earth, but when they get to heaven, it will be much better.” Lynn contended:

Even as African Americans, we always have to have a certain amount of faith. Whether you choose to be an avid church-goer or you know, the backslider, no matter how hard it gets, you are going to get through it, because you have seen people get through less and get through worse.

Faith and religion remained a limited factor in the lives of the research participants. To some degree, all of the research participants had been connected to a particular faith, religion or church. However, as some of the research participants have grown older their personal relationships with a higher being have become more personal, rather than relationships that are celebrated openly by attending a place of worship. One research participant admitted that she had lost the personal relationship with God that had been stressed by her parents since she was a child. Others discussed the constant struggle of finding a place for faith to fit into their current lives. For four of the research participants, religion was important in achieving a sense of racial self and it connected definitely to the history and future of African Americans in this country.
4.7 Pre- and In-College Experiences

Several themes concerning pre- and in-college experiences resulted from the individual interview and focus group phases. All of the research participants were excited about attending college. Janet and Michele expected the college experience to be “fun” and “a lot of partying.” Others expressed common residence hall and roommate concerns. Should I live on campus? Would I be paired with someone who is compatible? During her freshman year, Michele did not live with the person that she was originally assigned to. She ended up living with a high school friend who had decided to attend the same university. While Shaunte could have commuted to campus everyday, she was determined to reside in a residence hall in order to “get the full college experience.” Residing on campus has allowed her to establish “her own rules” while becoming more self-sufficient.

Several of the research participants also expressed reservations about living and learning in such a new environment. Caliya possessed an “optimistic view” about college but she was also concerned about what she was “getting herself into.” She was aware that being away from her parents for the first time would almost force her to develop a certain level of self-autonomy. Kim shared some of Caliya’s sentiments because she had always been told that college would be “the best years of her life;” however, she did not want to place herself in a negative position once she arrived on campus:

I didn’t want to get down there and get caught up in something, not even by choice, but just get caught up or messing up, or anything like that.
Knowing that the university was known for its academic reputation, Janet and Michele were concerned about the amount of academic rigor that was involved in their courses. Janet commented, "I knew it was going to be like studying or whatever, but I definitely did not understand how difficult it was going to be." In the same manner, Michele was concerned about her "workload" and the number of courses she would have to enroll in and complete since the university was on a quarter system. However, the same academic expectations that Michelle had of herself throughout her primary and secondary school years became the same expectations once she arrived on campus. She had always had a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) and she would attempt to "stay up at that level." Academic excellence for all of the young women was not the exception, but the rule.

Michelle viewed college as a networking vehicle to meet like-minded students who were interested in Business as a profession. Having grown accustomed to the campus through the Young Scholars Program, she looked forward to meeting people who were more like her." When asked what this specific statement meant, she responded:

More African Americans. I knew that around May, Heritage Festival was always a big thing. On the social scene, the Icebreakers brought a lot of people to campus.

Being able to connect with a group of students who shared similar cultural and social values and norms was essential to Michelle.

All of the research participants’ initial fears and concerns about the college experience were settled as they adjusted to their new living and learning environments.
Their educational and social experiences as African American women on a predominantly White campus were different in specifics, but were similar in nature.

**Educational Experiences**

Overall, the research participants had found the learning environment conducive to their educational needs. Shaunte thought that her academic program was “not as hard” as she first believed. She has been able to pursue her degree in Communications with a minor in Computer Information Systems (CIS) while taking honors courses. Academically, she has performed well. Similar to Shaunte, Caliya learned that the university was flexible in allowing her to change her major. After starting out as a pre-Pharmacy major and registering for a number of science course that she had found enjoyable in high school (but less favorable at the university), she steered herself towards a major that was more fulfilling: Textiles and Clothing. Michele had also been able to reap the rewards of her major and future professional aspirations by using her free time to design flyers for campus organizations.

There have not been all positive experiences for the research participants. Academic dilemmas, subtle forms of racism and being one of the only few students of color in a course have impacted the educational journeys for four of the seven women. Lynn admitted that she had not always been successful academically. There had been times when she had “busted out A’s” in every class” and other times when she “was struggling to get a D in a class.” While making the grade has been a part of her educational journey, she believed that the learning environment was more conducive to African American women, than African American men. Lynn felt that Black women at
the university "had more of an advantage" in the classroom. Wanting to know more about her statement, the researcher asked her to explain:

When the majority of African American women come here, they are about their studies. They might kick it, but they show up for class. Even if a Black male is cooperative, the teacher might not see it. I really think it is hard for African American male students to get ahead educationally.

Several of the other research participants' experiences with professors were slightly different. Meeting new people in- and outside of the classroom and learning to appreciate "different perspectives" has always mattered to Janet. But she had found the learning environment challenging, but for a different reason. She cited a recent incident in a geography course:

My geography professor asked a question about centrifugal forces, and wanted to know if we thought that African Americans pull the country together or apart. He asked one Black girl what she thought, and then he asked me to 'Speak for your people.'

Noting that the question was "stupid," and had nothing to do with the class discussion for that day, Janet commented that she was very upset by the teacher's question. The professor offered an apology after the class was dismissed and it gave Janet the opportunity to respond to his comments:

I said, 'You were assuming things about me. My father is White. Maybe I do know more about Black people, but please don't assume things about me.'

Shaunte commented that her educational journey as an African American woman on campus had been difficult as well, making her feel as though she were "back in high
school again where I was the only Black person in my classes.” Kim’s experiences in the classroom resembled both Janet and Shaunte’s frustration. Often looked to, to provide the Black experience, Kim stated that she now waited to see how other students would react:

“I really try to hold my tongue until the very end. In terms of answering questions on race, I will always get the side looks. Just two quarters ago, one of my professors asked me this off the wall question about the writer from the New York Times and she was like, ‘Don’t you feel just a little bit of pressure?’ I just totally disregarded her question.”

While Kim might have been more lenient in her description of her encounter with her professor, Michelle was not in the descriptions of her experiences on campus. She described them as “tough.” When asked about her interactions in- and outside of the classroom she commented:

It has been tough for professors to take me serious at first. I have to watch where I sit in the classroom, and I make sure that I talk to them on a personal level and treat them like a human being. If I didn’t and sat in a corner, they might not think that I care.

**Social Experiences**

Connecting to and meeting new students was a common refrain when the seven participants were asked about their social experiences on campus. Being at such a large university had permitted Caliya to meet new people. As a result, she had become more outgoing, vocal and less reserved in engaging with her peers. Michelle expressed similar sentiments, stating that she mostly hung out in the Black cultural center. Shaunte did not begin to fully explore the university until her sophomore year. She stopped “hanging out”
with her high school friends and started to participate actively in campus organizations. Socially, getting involved in student organizations has also supported Kim.

For Lynn, becoming a member of a Black Greek organization meant that “the girls that she kicked it with” viewed her differently. Likewise, she also acquired a new set of “friends”:

Since I crossed, a lot of people that I would be cordial to, they would just look at me. But when I got those letters on my chest, they would be like, ‘Hi girl.’ People expect you to change when you become Greek, whether you do or not.

After becoming a member of SG Rho, Lynn learned very quickly who her true friends were and those that she could only refer to as “acquaintances.” The researcher wanted to inquire about the differences between each group and Lynn offered this explanation:

Because, when you say that someone is your friend, you are giving them a lot of power in your life. I have to tell people, ‘You might be my very good acquaintance, but I have to be honest, you are not really my friend.’

Trust and honesty were two of the qualities that Lynn desired most in her friends; and, those specific qualities have yielded her only three friends on campus and a number of “very good acquaintances.”

Getting Educational and Social Support

Similar to the academic programs that the university offered, all seven, research participants found the university’s programs, offices and resources that were designed with students of color in mind very supportive. Likewise, all had the opportunity to
connect with either an office or individual who made it their mission to see that students of color were successful, educationally and socially. Both Michelle and Michele commented that they either worked for or volunteered in the OMA office. Caliya, Shaunte, Lynn and Kim also commented on the individuals and students who oversaw the Black cultural center. Those persons were cited as being “genuine” and “very helpful.” Shaunte even declared “if they ever tried to tear it down, I would lock and chain myself to it because there needs to be some place for African American students to come and get that kind of support.”

Although the women praised the university’s services, they also expressed their disappointments. Before viewing it as a “place that was more like home,” Janet was reluctant to go to the Black cultural Center because it was “gossip central.” Caliya was hesitant as well. Because she was unfamiliar with other Black students on campus her freshman year, her circle of friends consisted primarily of White students. Oftentimes, African American students who knew Caliya “alienated” her for choosing to “hang out with White people.” She was reluctant to visit the Hale Center fearing that other Blacks would treat her the same way. While Caliya experienced a transition from interacting with only White students to venturing out and meeting other students of color, she realized that her personal growth allowed her to quench a “yearning” she had, had for some time: to be around people who physically looked like her. This exact sentiment had been expressed by a number of the research participants; particularly those who were raised in predominantly White neighborhoods or attended schools where there were few students of color. Caliya offered this explanation:
With my White friends, I felt like I had to explain everything. I just wanted someone I could relate to. Sometimes, I would get down about certain things and they just would not be able to empathize because they just weren't Black.

Being Black and Female on Campus

Since arriving on campus, all seven women felt that their identifications as African American women had changed significantly. The research participants spoke about having acquired a greater sense of pride. Enrolling in African and African American-themed courses aided in this personal growth. Kim's course experience went above and beyond just "getting an A." It was more of an enlightening experience:

For the first time, the thoughts that I had, had before about why Black people are in the situations they are in or why people look at me in a certain way, were validated with academic journals and research and that meant a lot.

Caliya's experiences were similar. Not only had an African American course "heightened her sense of pride," but also "strengthened her relationship with God." Shaunte commented that she was more mature and had learned "a lot about my African American history" through her sorority membership.

Experiences in the classroom made Michelle more aware that she would always be seen "as an African American and then a woman." Lynn expressed similar sentiments. She stated that being in the university setting made her more aware that she was African American. For Lynn, that only made her more unique:

When you get around other people, you realize that there are certain situations that
only your race has been through. There are specifics. Everybody did not go through the same thing. I feel so much pride. It makes you hold your head up a little higher.

Janet too has acquired additional confidence because she has “accepted herself” and her “strengths and weaknesses.” Although she commented that she was at a point in her life where she was comfortable with being African American and Caucasian, contemplating which heritage she would formally identify with would always be a lifelong struggle.

While the research participants spoke about their racial growth, they were also highly critical of the campus community, particularly the African American student population. Janet has found the community to be divided and in serious competition for “resources.” Kim likened the Black student population to being in a swimming pool: “Some people are going to drown and some people are going to get out.” Michelle thought that the Black student community was “not responsible for the resources” they did have. She also suggested that the Black student population had “grown too comfortable” and did not “maximize its potential.” Shaunte agreed and believed that the African American student community should “strive a little bit harder and not be so complacent.”

According to Caliya, African American student leaders on campus were committed and dedicated to uplifting the concerns of other Black students. However, plenty of “ignorance” still existed and individuals still “complained that there was nothing to do.” She has found the Black student population to be apathetic and too busy “hating on each other.” Lynn concurred, but suggested that Black students were too concerned about “me, me, me.” She cited the recent debate over Affirmative Action:
When people come here it is hard to leave that me, me, me attitude if they ever leave it. So while you have some people who are like, ‘We need to boycott this Affirmative Action,’ others are like, ‘Oh, that really does not affect me.’ They don’t realize that is does affect them.

4.8 Sorority Influences

Going Greek

Membership in one of the four, Black Greek sororities have impacted the lives of the seven participants in various ways. The women who participated in this research study sought membership primarily because they would have the opportunity to give back to the African American community. Likewise, participants suggested that being a member had made them “more assertive and vocal,” “business-oriented,” “career-oriented,” “prepared professionally” and “organized.” The development of leadership skills was stressed during their initiation period and realized currently in and through their involvement as chapter officers and committee chairpersons. Becoming leaders in their respective organizations and campus and surrounding communities continues to be achieved through the lens of academic excellence, sisterhood and service.

All seven research participants felt that becoming a member of a traditional Black Greek organization was important although for various reasons. Michelle’s cheerleading coach had a significant influence on her seeking membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha. Lynn had no desire to join a White sorority and took the initiative to begin researching and investigating the Black Greek chapters on her own. Participating in a high school enrichment program sponsored by Sigma Gamma Rho had piqued Janet’s
interest in Black Greek life. Once she arrived on campus, she started attending programs hosted by Delta Sigma Theta and was impressed with the organization’s commitment to public service. Michele was also excited about Delta’s commitment to the campus and surrounding communities as well as the value members placed on sisterhood. Kim’s attraction was also due to “having never seen 23 Black women so close before.”

Initially, Caliya wanted to join her sorority for all the “wrong reasons.” She felt the need to affiliate with a Black Greek organization because two of her relatives were already members. Likewise, she was attracted seriously to the “external things” of Black Greek life. Unclear as to what she meant by “external things,” the researcher requested that she expound:

Like you see them party stroll, or you see them step and wear their letters. There is like this clique, but everyone knows that they are really cool.

Caliya’s fascination with Black Greek life was short lived because after learning that Sigma Gamma Rho was committed to public service, her perspective changed about the purposes of Black fraternities and sororities. Seeking membership not only meant that she was responsible for “uplifting Black people,” but also to serve as a “leader and to think about others and helping them out too.”

“Seeing a group of Black women run programs” is what attracted Shaunte to Delta Sigma Theta. Shaunte’s experiences with Black women had been limited in the sense that like Michelle and Michele, she did not have a biological sister. Membership in the sorority provided her with a sense of sisterhood and the opportunity to “build a bond with other Black women that was going to last a lifetime.” At the same time, she was
initially hesitant to get involved:

I hadn’t grown up in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Would I be accepted or would I be looked at, as you know, an outsider.

After being initiated, Shaunte’s hesitation was soon replaced with interacting with other women who made community service and sisterhood a priority.

Seeking membership in a Black Greek sorority has not only been for individual gain, but has also served as a means for giving back, particularly to the campus and surrounding African American communities. Several of the young women indicated that they had benefited from the relationships they were able to establish with personal and professional mentors, including their parents, family acquaintances and professors. As a result, some of the respondents have acquired the similar notion of serving others by committing to their own formal or informal, mentor/mentee relationships. For instance, Michelle took several young, African American females under her wing, even though she had been assigned only one mentee through OMA. The guidance she was able to provide was a way for her to “share with them about my own experiences and the things that I wish I had done.”

Black Greek Life, PWIs & HBCUs

When asked what it was like to be a member of a traditional, Black Greek sorority on a predominantly White campus, the research participants were able to offer shared perspectives and concrete examples. All seven of the women agreed that the campus community, outside of the African American student population, knew very little about
their historical purposes and presence. Although their organizations were clearly visible, Shaunte suggested that the Black Greek sororities were more like “needles in a haystack.” She cited the numerous differences between the NPHC organizations and the predominantly White sororities who belonged to the Pan-Hellenic Association (PHA). For instance, a number of the White sororities had houses on Greek row. The Black sororities did not. Kim also alluded to the date parties that many of the White sororities hosted; Black sororities did not. Likewise, PHA’s financial situation was significantly better than that of the NPHC. With the limited numbers of students of color on campus, NPHC sororities were not able to have 100-member rush or intake periods. Despite these differences, Shaunte had made it a point to not compare the NPHC organizations to what the other Greek life governing boards were accomplishing, but rather to “focus on what we were doing for our community.”

Michelle described the experience as “funny” because Black Greek sororities did not have open dinners where aspirants could come and learn about organizations. She commented that the “protocol” was very different and that the Black Greek organizations “took business matters a little more seriously.” Lynn likened the Black Greek experience to being on an “island” where the university was more like a “continent.” When asked to explain her comparison, Lynn commented:

It almost becomes like a separate school than Ohio State. Black people don’t know about the White Greeks. They know about the Divine Nine.
While all of the research participants acknowledged that their organizations' were clearly visible on campus, others did speculate about how their Greek life experience would have been different if they had attended another type of university, specifically an HBCU. Caliya commented that at HBCUs “it is so much of a bigger deal down there, and they really do run the yard.” Shaunte agreed, stating that the Divine Nine would have “played a much bigger part on the campus as a whole, than just on one specific community.” However, she also suggested that there might have been drawbacks to joining a sorority or fraternity at an HBCU. For instance, she cited that the numbers of Black students on campus were significantly higher than at a PWI. Perhaps potential members would not have the chance to “really bond” unlike the experience they would have had, had they joined a much smaller chapter.

Michelle’s sentiments mirrored Shaunte. While she commended that the rich history that is often associated with Black Greek organizations and HBCUs (six of the Black Greek fraternities and sororities were founded at HBCUs), she had come to appreciate those sororities and fraternities that were founded on predominantly White campuses (Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi and Sigma Gamma Rho). She acknowledged that starting these types of organizations must have been difficult and for those chapters who were single-lettered chapters that “was the closest thing to the actual starting of their organization.”

Janet also cited the prevalence of colorism or “the valuing of people with light brown skin over people with dark brown skin” that still plagues African American fraternities
and sororities on Historically Black campuses (Willie, 2003, p. 101). Janet was able to provide a concrete example:

My best friend goes to a Black college in the South and her mother is an AKA. She is a senior and about to graduate down there, it is still a color conscious thing. She is very dark and she thinks that is one of the main reasons why they have not picked her.

**Being Black, Female and Greek**

Having the opportunity to join Greek organizations, founded by other college-educated African American women, has had an incredible impact on how each of the seven participants have come to view their racial selves. Michele found that she is able to communicate easily with Black women now and can “have a better relationship with women” in general. Lynn’s affiliation with Sigma Gamma Rho has encouraged her to learn about her ethnic history more. Her fellow member, Caliya, believed that membership had strengthened her identity more as an African American woman. Her membership had also required her to re-think her role as an African American student leader on campus. She commented:

> We are supposed to be role models. To me that was the original purpose of sororities and to encourage young Black women to stay in school. We are supposed to be tools or resources for them.

Similar to Caliya, Michelle noted that her membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha made her more “accountable” to her community.

Affiliating with a traditional, Black Greek organization had allowed Janet to become more “comfortable with herself as an African American woman.” She was now
in a position to "improve things for African American women" while becoming more "conscious of Black causes and problems that needed to be addressed." As a chapter officer, Kim found that improving things could come at a great personal cost, especially when one is expected to speak on behalf of the chapter and not their own personal views. Leading a group of her peers required her to abide by a higher standard. Similar to Kim, Shaunte holds herself to a higher standard; therefore, membership should not be taken lightly. A potential member should be prepared to meet higher expectations before they complete the membership intake process:

A lot of people will say that your sorority made you. But, with Delta, to me, it is like, you have to be somebody. Delta can't make you, because to even come to Delta and approach it, you have to have this, this and this.

Sorority History, Myths and On-Going Rivalries

The discussion that focused on how each of the four, Black Greek organizations view each other evoked both historical and at times, personal references that differed significantly depending on the sorority-affiliation of each participant. Michele suggested the most positive perspective. She thought that each of the four organizations saw themselves as a "business," however her response also highlighted the on going "rivalries" between the organizations. When asked what she meant by this statement, she responded, "Just the whole Delta and AKA thing, like who was first." Janet also described the various perceptions of each of the Black Greek sororities in depth:

I could go to the stereotypes and the common misconceptions that AKAs are
the prettiest and Deltas and Zetas are the ugliest. It is more like physical differences.

“Negative” was how Caliya explained the perceptions of each of the organizations. She commented further:

Different sororities may have different issues with different sororities. They just continue to hate each other and they not only do it, they pass it on to these other lines that are coming in.

When asked who was “they,” Caliya defined “they” as the young women who were approved for membership, taught their sorority’s history, initiaied and then were told to perpetuate some of the aforementioned myths that tended to cause more harm, than good.

Michelle’s concerns were not to distant from Caliya, although she referred to the internal dilemmas as “poison” and that poison could come in the form of “older members that have a certain hatred against others on the same campus.” For young women who are impressed easily and desire to fit in, they may “take on the same beliefs.” If Michelle’s perception is correct, then according to Lynn, that poison does not exist on the national sorority level because “each organization has extreme respect for each other.” The poison was more prevalent on the collegiate level.

Several of the young women used the term “hating” to describe how organizations perceived the others. Given that the basic premise of Black sororities is sisterhood, one might assume that the relationships between each of the organizations would be of a sisterly nature. The data suggested otherwise. The researcher asked respondents to apply this concept of having a great dislike (for whatever reason) to African American women in general. The opinions and reasons that derived from several of the conversations were
of particular interest. Several of the respondents suggested that Black women were “overly-competitive,” “jealous and threatened by other Black women’s accomplishments,” “catty” and “petty.”

Caliya attributed the “hating” to jealousy and “Black women who were not supportive” when another “Black woman succeeded.” Because Caliya’s statement was strong with emotion, she was asked to expound:

Instead of being proud that a Black woman has achieved something and has uplifted us so that people could follow in her footsteps and do greater things than she did, they just look at it as themselves, as ‘I didn’t get that.’

Shaunte alluded to the sense of competition that permeated the four, Black sororities on campus. All four organizations were “competing for members and awards.” Janet’s comments were similar to Shaunte’s, in that sororities were competing for the title of “who runs the yard, who is the best.” When asked why this tension continued to exist, Janet likened it to the historical misconceptions of each sorority as well as the low self-esteem issues that some African American women confront and the “images we see everyday, video hoes and all those.” Kim agreed, suggesting “although we were founded on the same principles, everyone is going to tell their own story.”

The prior examples offered by the research participants are troubling. When asked was there anything that could be done to pacify some of the tension, although doubtful, some of the participants were able to offer solutions. For instance, Michelle thought that more personal interaction and collaborative programming needed to occur. Although she recognized that there was a lot of competition on campus, she also noted that it was “sad
because if anyone should be real tight, it should be us because we are at a White university.” Caliya also believed that a significant amount of reciprocity would have to be involved:

You have to reach out and be the bigger person. But that other organization, they have to reach out too. It is not a one way street, but a two way thing.

Both Caliya and Michelle are correct in their observations if Black Greek sororities are to thrive and meet their original purposes and needs. While all of the sororities’ programmatic goals should be to strengthen the African American community, respecting each other as African American women and sisters who are a part of fraternal life should be a priority as well. One respondent summed it up well: “Black people need to get along and come together, especially Black women.”

Perceptions of Non-Greek, Black Women, Black Students and the Campus Community

As some of the respondents suggested, the bickering that sometimes occurred between each of the organizations would never cease because of the organizations’ histories and the initiation and participation of members who perpetuated myths. But, had these emotions spilled out into the African American community on campus as well as influenced the interest of other, non-Greek African American women? The research participants’ opinions varied. Michele hoped that non-Greek, African American women viewed the Black sororities with a “positive attitude.” However, Michelle thought that some non-Greek, Black women tended to “idolize” people that were Greek. Caliya
believed that two views dominated. Some African American women only saw the “glitz and glamour” of Black sorority life. Other non-Greek, Black women felt that women who joined sororities were “stuck-up and thought they were better than everyone else.” Janet’s comments were similar. She commented that non-Greek, African American women perceived Black Greek female members to be “unapproachable.”

While some non-Greek Black women might view sorority life as being “secretive,” Shaunte hoped that they also saw Black sororities as outlets where “Black women could be close and not necessarily in competition with each other.” Kim also thought part of the hesitation was that some Black women did not understand Black sororities’ purposes:

People don’t understand. They want to be it because they like what they see. I think they love to gossip about us. They have the desire to be a part of us that they begin to create little illusions in their heads.

Similar to the views of how the Black Greek sororities saw each other, the perceptions about the entire Black Greek community were less than favorable. Respondents again used words or phrases like “too much hating”, “disappointed,” and “don’t take it seriously” to describe the overall community. Janet suggested that there should be more “unity” and that the organizations should “take advantage of the strengths that each organization has.” Shaunte expressed her frustration with the Black Greek fraternities suggesting that they should “do more for the campus community instead of just throwing parties.” She desired to see programs and events that were “challenging for students, opening them up, showing them new things and pushing them to new levels.”
Although Lynn agreed, she also commented that Black Greeks were responsible partly for many of the negative perceptions:

If I was White and looking at the Black organizations, and always saw that they were talking about each other or always dogging each other out, I would be like this is so ridiculous.

The non-minority community’s perceptions of Black Greek life on campus did not differ too much from the participants’ responses concerning how their organizations were viewed on a predominantly White campus. Although Black Greek organizations were visible, for some of the respondents, their organizations’ level of involvement on campus was still not perceived the same as the White Greek fraternities and sororities.

Shaunte was very clear and distinct in her response, posing the following question: “Do they even know about us?” While Black fraternities and sororities could assume some of the blame for only publicizing in specific areas on campus, Shaunte was quick to refute the claim suggesting that “programs are open to any and everybody.” She explained further:

Like when you have the Student Organization fair in the fall, when you put all the Black fraternities and sororities together, then that is a whole section for White students to avoid. If White people aren’t coming out to seek it, then what can we do?

Janet shared several of Shaunte’s sentiments. In her interactions with members of the majority, she was often asked “Why don’t you all have a house” or “Why can’t you state when your rush process will occur?” She cited specifically an incident that had occurred at the beginning of the academic year:
There was this Rush Booklet put out by the Office of Student Activities and it basically said how you can contact us if we were going to rush in the spring. We didn’t want to be included in the book if they were going to misrepresent us.

Janet maintained that although White people had been welcomed into Black Greek fraternities and sororities, there “was so much history behind them” that her “goal was not to publicize everything.” Janet suggested that those “who were interested, would show their interest.”

But not everyone agreed. Caliya suggested that the Black Greek organizations tended to “isolate” and “seclude” themselves from the entire Greek system on campus. Heeding the advice she offered earlier about creating reciprocal relationships between Black Greek sororities, Caliya suggested that Black Greek organizations do the same with White Greek organizations:

They try to get to know more about us when they have retreats and stuff and they try to encourage PHC members to go. But, we don’t even try to.

Pressed further to address why this cross-cultural and organizational interaction was so important, Caliya commented, “because we are a multicultural country and you have to learn how to work with all different kinds of people.”

*Parents’ Perceptions and Hazing*

Although there were some initial concerns about joining Black Greek sororities, most of the parents of each research participant supported their daughters’ decisions to become members. Having already experienced one son who joined a Black Greek
fraternity, Michele’s parents were supportive, particularly her mother who paid for her initiation fees. Shaunte’s mother was supportive as well. Kim’s mother, also a member of Delta, did not pressure her daughter to join. However, when she crossed her mother shared that she was “so happy that she did it.” Michelle’s mother was not that receptive to her joining and questioned her daughter about the incredible time commitment that her membership intake process consumed. Janet’s mother also shared similar concerns, and really “did not want her to join.” Caliya also experienced a disconnect from her family although she had always “valued their opinions.”

Lynn was determined to keep her membership intake process a secret from her parents, especially her mother. Her mother had expressed reservations because when she was in college, one of her “roommates had her teeth knocked out.” Hazing continues to plague and haunt Black Greek organizations regardless of the type of institution a member decides to attend. Like Lynn’s mother, the participants tended to describe physical acts of hazing (i.e. getting beat up, taking wood, paddling) rather than the mental and emotional forms that exist as well. According to Lynn, Black Greek organizations have a hazing “stigma” and she believed that many Greek members continue to perpetuate it:

I know a lot of people who are Greek and they were hazed. They could not wait to knock somebody out or swing on them. I know so many people who have said, ‘If you weren’t hazed, then you don’t get any respect from me.’

Shaunte offered a similar perspective, suggesting that hazing “goes hand in hand with Black Greek life.” When asked what that statement meant, she said:
It is the first thing that people think of. before they ask about what type of programs you might have, they ask if your organization hazes.

Caliya described hazing as “outrageous” and commented that “it doesn’t help you learn anything.” Michelle stated that she often felt “angered” when hazing in Black Greek organizations was brought to her attention because all of the Black sororities and fraternities were “founded on Christian principles.”

While all of the research participants were quick to denounce hazing, some admitted that it still occurred “underground.” Others suggested that while they do not support the concept of hazing in its most traditional sense, there was still the need for potential members to experience a “process.” Kim commented that without a membership intake process, “there would be no way that I would be as close to my sands”. Shaunte also defined “process” in this manner:

Process is not another word for hazing. A process is where you are put through something, you are tested. There is a difference between testing and physical abuse, which to me, is unnecessary.

Janet’s response was in congruence with Shaunte. Although she thought that physical hazing goes too far, a “pledge process is important because you learn about time management.”

When asked if the future of Black Greek life was in jeopardy because of the persistence of hazing, Michelle agreed and suggested that Black Greek life was on the “edge of extinction.” In her opinion, the initiation of immature and uneducated individuals contributed to the continuation of hazing. Caliya stated, “I think it is just
going to continue to tear down the Black Greek world, especially at PWIs.” Janet even referenced the notion of undergraduate Black Greek chapters being removed all together. When asked what the university’s campus might be like for African American students who might not have the option to join she argued:

That’s crazy. Delta was founded by Black college women, women my age. I think the campus community would lose so much.

However, without some type of serious intervention, Lynn contended that in the next ten years, “Black Greek organizations may not be on too many campuses because so many of them have forbidden these organizations forever.” The reality is that physical, mental and emotional hazing still occurs in all forms. But as one participant summed up nicely: “Getting beat is not going to make your relationship stronger with your sands, but being able to think as one will.”

All seven of the women made it very clear that they would seek membership again if given the opportunity. The young women stressed that their commitment to their respective organizations would extend well beyond their collegiate years. Community service, role modeling and mentoring remained a part of the attraction to their respective organizations. They would also advocate for other women to explore the rich histories of all of the sororities before committing to one. Likewise, their formal initiation into a traditional, Black Greek sorority solidified a lifelong commitment that will be realized through their joining alumnae or graduate chapters.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Year of Matriculation</th>
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Chart 4.1  Group Profile of the Research Participants
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<th>OSU Founding Date</th>
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<td>Theta Chapter</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Kim, 3. Janet,</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Staunte</td>
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<td>Delta Omicron Chapter</td>
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<td>Delta Phi Chapter</td>
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</table>

Chart 4.2 National and Local Black Greek Sorority Profile

* = Chapter and member information not available because either the organization is not active currently or the chapter’s website does not list the requested information.
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

In general, the research findings were consistent with the current literature on racial identity development and African American students. The first stage of analysis organized the findings according to the research questions that were posed during the individual interviews and focus group phases. In the second stage of analysis, the research findings were arranged according to emerging themes to provide additional insight into this unique population of women. A brief "snapshot" of each research participant has already been reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will offer an interpretation of their educational and social experiences. It is the researcher's hope that administrators, faculty and staff will find this chapter useful in connecting the developmental theories, models and current literature to practice.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The research findings have been grouped into five broad categories:

- Black Racial Identity Development
- Education and Family
- Role Models and Mentors
- Faith
- Sorority Membership
Each category discusses the most relevant themes as they pertained to the experiences of the seven research participants.

**Racial Identity Development**

The development of a racial identity for African Americans consists of moving away from the educational, social and cultural forces that prevent them from exploring fully who they are, and more towards a sense of “Blackness.” This notion is at the very core of Cross’s (1991) Black Racial Identity Development Model and the four stages African Americans must progress through in order to achieve a sense of racial “self:” *Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion* and *Internalization*. Cross’s model is useful in describing where the seven research participants are currently in their racial identity development. The data suggests that the young women have progressed through the *Pre-Encounter, Encounter* and *Immersion-Emersion* stages. However, because racial identity development is a complex process over the life span, depending on the context, the research participants may contemplate or “recycle” back through former stages (Parham, 1999, as cited in Evans, 2001).

**Pre-Encounter**

Even before enrolling at the institution, the respondents’ development of a racial identity had already begun to form as a result of family, educational and social influences. Part of their development occurred because they had been provided with the opportunity to explore their African American culture and participate in cultural holidays (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For instance, family members had influenced Caliya to
inquire and learn more about her racial history. Several of the young women also shared that their families and churches celebrated and acknowledged Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, African American History Month and Kwanzaa.

Likewise, their formation of a racial identity was supported by “family traditions and histories” and attending “local institutions such as schools, churches and cultural organizations” (Cross, Strauss & Phagen-Smith, 1999, p. 34). Shaunte’s mother had instilled racial pride by purchasing “Black dolls and books by African American authors.” Michelle’s participation in a local enrichment program occurred because her mother encouraged her to seek out other professional, African American women. Hughes (2003) would contend that both parents were practicing racial socialization or imparting their personal views about race and ethnicity on and through their daughters. At some point in their lives, all of the research participants had been socialized to or taught about their racial heritages.

*Encounter*

Adolescence can be a very critical period during the process of identity formation. Of particular interest were the numerous racial encounters the seven respondents had experienced prior to their college enrollment. According to Hrabowski et al. (2002), before entering college, some African American females have already been exposed to images that portray them as troublemakers, teenage mothers and the recipients of social assistance. To cope, some African American girls engage in sexual activity or drugs, or tend to be overly concerned about their physical appearance (Robinson & Ward, 1991, as mentioned in Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998).
Fortunately, none of the Black women who participated in this study ascribed to any of the aforementioned characteristics. Under the careful guidance of parents, immediate and extended family members and individuals in the community, they were able to escape the harsh realities that were all too common for some of their female peers. The seven young women in this study tended to be goal-oriented and placed a high value on getting a good education.

However, this did not mean that the seven women did not encounter situations that called into question their racial selves. With the exception of Lynn, all of the research participants were reared in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools. For several of the research participants, being one of the few students of color in either the classroom or neighborhood posed unique challenges. Michelle recalled an incident where her predominantly White school summoned her mother to talk about her academic performance. Her mother was quite aware that there would be some difficulties in that Michelle was one of a few African American students in her school. Her mother’s perceptions were confirmed when a White teacher suggested that because Michelle came from a single parent home, she was not getting the “attention she deserved.” Michelle remembered this experience vividly because her grades had not slipped and she was still doing well in her classes. The incident resonates with Michelle today because from that point on in her academic career “there was nothing less than an A or a B.”

Caliya also learned at a very young age that she was different “racially” and often thought of as the “token, Black girl” in her classes. She even stated that she had learned to be “careful” when she interacted with her White peers and teachers:
They were definitely looking at me. I guess they were not used to teaching Black students and they didn't know how I would act. I remember some girl saying, 'Oh, you are really smart' and I was like, 'Why wouldn't I be?'

Kim’s experiences in the classroom were similar. Likewise, many of the racial encounters she experienced occurred outside of the learning environment as well. For Kim, meeting new people and making friends was difficult. She commented that because she and her older sister were among the few African Americans at their school they were often treated as the "outcasts." When asked to explain what this statement meant, she offered the following:

There were several people, who were the popular girls who would try to make sure that we weren't in the circle of friends. This was hard. I mean, you don't want to be the only person sitting at the lunch table.

Being one of the few students of color in their respective learning environments was not just a characteristic unique to their primary and secondary school years. All seven women have found themselves in similar situations throughout their undergraduate matriculation. The current literature suggests that students of color on predominantly White campuses experience feelings of rejection, isolation and alienation from the majority culture (Fries-Britt, 2002). In the classroom, if they are not ignored or shunned during classroom discussions, then they may be asked to provide the "Black perspective" (Johnson-Newman & Exum, 1998; Love, 1993). The latter case was not a rarity for several of the research participants. Recently, Janet had engaged in a conversation with a geography professor who requested for her to "speak for her people." Shaunte's
experiences of being one of the few African American students in her honors courses reminded her of the time she spent in Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, hoping that she would not be the only Black student enrolled. Lynn offered an illustrative point by suggesting that when she refused to be the “speaker for the whole Black race,” she was deemed the “frustrated, Black woman.”

To counter, perhaps, the expectations of professors and students who were of the majority, Michelle adhered to some very simple and personal rules. Since arriving at the university, she watched where she sat in class, always arrived to class on time and treated everyone like a human being. Most importantly, she talked with her professors on a more “personal level.” Michelle’s coping mechanisms inside the classroom are similar to those expressed in the literature. Carter (1987) suggests that when minority students are able to interact with faculty they tend to perform well academically. Likewise, engaging in conversation and getting acquainted with faculty members can aid in African American student persistence (Littleton, 2003).

*Immersion-Emersion*

With the appropriate social and cultural support African American students at PWIs, especially women, may have the opportunity to journey towards “self” (O’Toole, 1999). Issues of assimilation or having to disassociate from their cultural identity may cease if the proper resources and programming are in place physically and maintained financially (Arminio, et al., 2000). Several of the research participants discussed the importance of being involved with the Office of Minority Affairs (OMA) either through
receiving a scholarship, participating in its enrichment programs or volunteering as student mentors or tutors.

Colleges and universities should provide physical space for African American students to come together and interact with each other (Tatum, 1997). At some point and time during the interview and focus group phases, the seven women lauded the programs and staff located within the Black cultural center. The Black cultural center on campus not only provided a physical space where students of color could gather, but it had almost become a “home away from home” for the research participants.

Initially, however, not all of the respondents had positive experiences with the Black cultural center. Janet commented that she perceived it to be “gossip central.” Caliya was hesitant to utilize the center because she had not been able to establish a network of African American friends. Regardless of their initial concerns, all of the women used or entered the center on a daily basis—either for sorority programming, campus events or just as a “place to hang out between classes.”

Enrolling at an institution of higher education has also allowed for the seven women to immerse themselves in their racial and ethnic cultures by enrolling in African and African American courses. Feelings of “enlightenment” and a “sense of pride” resonated with the research participants after they had the opportunity to take such courses. Likewise, joining a traditional, Black Greek sorority had encouraged several of the research participants to learn their racial history “even more.” Likewise, the premises of committing to scholarship, sisterhood and service attracted them to their respective organizations. This sense of racial pride and desire to give back to the community is
similar to the current research on the importance of ethnically-themed or multicultural organizations. Guiffrida (2003) believes these types of student organizations “significantly impact African American students’ social integration and racial identity development” (p. 316). Particularly for African American students who were reared in predominantly White neighborhoods, membership in a multicultural organization offers a cultural space where racial history and traditions can be accessed easily, and a supportive environment where social networks can be established (Saylor & Aries, 1999).

**Bi-Racial Identity Development**

The aforementioned discussion on Black Racial Identity Development was applicable technically for six of the research participants. Although she experienced commonly some of the same racial encounters as her peers, Janet is bi-racial. This research study would not be complete without considering the current literature that speaks to the experiences of bi- or multi-racial students.

Throughout her interview and the focus group, Janet reiterated how difficult it had been to associate comfortably with her racial identity because upon first glance, people would assume she was African American. Although she acknowledged that she identified more with her African American heritage, in many ways she could not ignore or deny her father’s heritage. Janet’s physical description and subsequent affiliation with a Black identity is consistent with the literature. Kerwin and Poterotto (1995) suggest that in college, “bi-racial students are likely to embrace one culture and reject the other” (p. 72, as cited in Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). However, as a bi- or multi-racial
student matures and develops, they are more likely to embrace their multi-racial heritages without regard for others’ perceptions or expectations.

While bi-racial children can be reared in healthy and supportive environments, there will always be “particular challenges associated with being bi-racial that must be negotiated” (Tatum, 1997, p. 175). Janet had confronted some of these challenges prior to enrolling at the institution. During her primary years when her mother would volunteer at her school, classmates would often inquire as to why they did not resemble each other. When her family relocated to Ohio and Janet started high school, her physical appearance and ability to “fit in” with other African American students became priorities as well. Having been reared in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools, high school was really the first time she was able to interact with other African American students. While Janet had yearned for the “Black experience,” her transition was not easy:

I didn’t fit in right away with the Black culture. It took me probably close to a year before I had established like any real friends.

When asked about why her physical appearance was so important, she stated that she often thought that she was an “ugly duckling.” Janet’s internal conflict between her “Blackness and Whiteness” also became visible on the outside:

I didn’t like my hair and I always had it wrapped up into a tight bun. People would always make comments about it and it would bother me. I ended up cutting all of my hair to fit in.

Janet’s experiences were similar to those expressed by Walker (2001) who is also bi-racial and Jewish. Like Janet, her mother is African American and her father is Caucasian. She was reared in a loving family that encouraged her to explore her bi-racial
and religious identities without restraint. Because of this self-exploration, later in life she had come to the following realization:

I do not have to define this body. I do not have to belong to one camp, school or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else’s experience. I do not have to remember who I, or anyone else thinks I am. I am transitional space, form-shifting space, place of a thousand hellos and a million goodbyes. (p. 4)

In time, Janet will hopefully arrive at such conclusions.

**Education and Family**

The pursuit of a college education was held in high regard by all seven of the research participants. Likewise, immediate and extended family members encouraged this pursuit as well. These perceptions were not inconsistent with the current literature. Hrabowski et al. (2002) research on African American women enrolled in a university enrichment program suggests that oftentimes, Black women arrive to the university setting with a “deep commitment to education, a supportive environment in the home and a focus on self-help” (p. 19). Likewise, undergraduate, African American women have usually been “encouraged to be strong and self-sufficient” (p. 19). Several of the research participants also commented that their pursuit of a college degree was in honor of their parents who had sacrificed so much, in order to ensure that they and their siblings were given the opportunity to be successful educationally.


**Role Models and Mentors**

The dynamic of mother/daughter relationships took on significant meaning as five of the research participants selected their mothers as role models. In the role modeling and mentoring literature, this is not a rarity. Hrabowski et al. (2002) research on undergraduate, African American women in the college setting maintains that mothers or female guardians tend to “play a central role in Black women’s lives” (p. 112). Through their shared personality characteristics, watching their mothers “overcome the odds,” or instilling in them a positive self-esteem or a sense of competitiveness, five of the women suggested that their mothers had the most significant impact on their lives.

**Faith**

While faith remained a limited factor in the lives of the research participants, they all agreed that their relationship with a higher being had taken on more of a personal relationship since arriving at the university, rather than one that was celebrated openly by attending church or professing their faith. However, several of the research participants also alluded to the fact that when they experienced hardships or obstacles, they were able to connect with a higher being. Personal growth and development, dealing with the illnesses of family members or even death had allowed both Caliya and Michele to explore their faith identities. The aforementioned situations were consistent with those expressed similarly in Hrabowski et al. (2002) research study on how undergraduate, African American women cope by using faith while attending college.
*Sorority Membership*

The sorority experiences of the seven women and their decisions for joining resonated with the current literature. Giddings (1988) suggests that sororities provide a wide range of opportunities for women to grow and develop. Sisterhood is primarily at the core of Black Greek sororities. The seven participants agreed that sisterhood was a part of the initial attraction to their respective organizations. Several of the young women have been able to “bond” with their African American peers who share similar personal and professional aspirations. For instance, Michele was impressed by how sisterly members of Delta Sigma Theta were towards each other. Being able to interact with older, collegiate sorors interested Kim. Establishing and building upon the life-long friendships that her sorority has been able to foster remains an important feature for her. Kim’s membership has also allowed her to make connections with younger, African American women who resembled her physically—something that had not occurred while growing up in predominantly White neighborhoods. Likewise, for the research participants who did not have biological sisters, their “sorors,” “line sisters” or “sands” were able to offer that sense of kinship and assisted in filling in the void.

Traditional, Black Greek sororities that were founded by African American women primarily for African American women offer a unique forum for racial support and growth. Membership for the seven participants had strengthened their racial and gender identities, and encouraged them to learn even more about their racial histories. For those women who had difficulties in the past forming relationships with Black women,
they have found the organizations’ social environments to be supportive and understanding. Membership in the sorority has also served as one of the main vehicles each participant has used in navigating a predominantly White campus. Although Shaunte commented earlier that Black Greek sororities and their members were more like “needles in a haystack,” through effective programming and engaging actively in both the campus and surrounding communities, they have been able to establish a presence on campus.

Giddings (1988) also asserts that the operational structures of Black Greek sororities permit members to “grow through cooperation, leadership development, “culture,” and exposure to the leading figures of the times” (p. 21). After being initiated, several of the members assumed leadership roles and offices in their respective organizations. Likewise, other respondents began to participate in other civic and social organizations that affected the lives of African American students.

In the same manner, Black Greek sororities encourage members to “uplift the Black race” by taking active stances in their communities through public service (p. 20). Caliya mentioned this notion of “uplifting the race” often throughout her interview. She had arrived at the conclusion that her membership not only meant that she had a responsibility to the African American community, but also to serve as a “leader.” Michelle echoed these exact sentiments. Becoming a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha had encouraged her to be more “accountable to her community.” Already a mentor through OMA, her sorority membership and meaningful experiences inspired her to become a mentor for other, young African American women on campus.
Sorority membership also ensured a connection with older and more established, African American women who were able to offer professional and career guidance (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999). Because all of the research participants indicated that they would continue their membership through either alumnae or graduate chapters, several of them have already started to network professionally with older and more seasoned sorors. For instance, Lynn commented about the professional connections she had already established with other members of Sigma Gamma Rho:

I have gotten so many connections to different women. If I wanted to change my major to something off the wall like paint manufacturing, I could call up a soror and she would be like, 'For real, we have a soror that works in that. Do you want an internship?'

Networking with older sorors now, meant that Michele could have professional contacts already lined up when she graduates. In the same manner as Lynn, she stated:

I know there are so many Deltas out there, that if I need help with a job, I know they will help me.

Although being a member of a traditional, Black Greek sorority has its advantages, very rarely does the literature focus on the disadvantages. Throughout the interview and focus group phases, the research participants alluded to the dark side of Black fraternal life—pledging or hazing and internal strife. The current literature that addresses the negatives associated with Black Greek organizations suggests that these once revered organizations are on a downward spiral towards self-destruction. Being concerned about whether or not HBCUs or PWIs will sponsor or allow chapters to exist should be the least of their worries. Graham (2000) contends that with the "rising number
of incidents during the admissions or initiation stages at several campuses" Black sororities and fraternities should be more concerned about pending legal allegations (p. 99).

5.2 The Emergence of Multiple Identities

"Shifting" and Double Lives

Cross, Parham and Helms (1991) suggests that African Americans "tend to live in two material and cultural realities" (p. 327). While many African Americans dwell in and associate with other African Americans through their educational, social and faith institutions, they "still must adapt to white-run schools, workplaces, military settings and media" (p. 355). Thus, they have to learn how to "shift" in between various environments and settings. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) define "shifting" as:

A sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society. Perhaps more than any other group of Americans, Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men and other segments of the community. (p. 7)

The "shifting" of the seven women in this study was not only revealed in their interactions with friends, teachers or professors who were of the majority culture, but also in their perception of the "ideal Black woman." When asked what it meant to be Black and female, some suggested that they had to be "strong" and the "backbone of the family." Their responses concur with the research that Jones and Shorter-Gooden conducted on 333 Black women from a variety of educational, socio-economic and regional backgrounds. While the researchers acknowledge the incredible history of
African American women in the United States, they also point out that these historical expectations have led to “myths” or non-truths about African American women. Likewise, these myths lead to the assumption that all Black women are the same. For instance, not all Black women are “unshakeable,” or “are physically and emotionally impervious to life’s most challenging events and circumstances” (p. 11).

Another unhealthy myth that both the researchers and the participants in this study cited was that African American women tend to be emotionless. Having and taking the opportunity to cry, get angry or be happy poses too many consequences for them; therefore, some African American women prefer to “mute their personalities” (p. 11). Unfortunately, this particular myth has led to other unhealthy mental and physical behaviors including weight gain, suicide and depression.

Inherent in being Black and female in the United States is that you are a “contradiction.” Lynn suggested this term during her individual interview:

People want African American women to be strong.
But there are those that think if you are a woman, you are supposed to be weak and mild. If you stand up for yourself, then you are not being ladylike.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden suggests that African American women are walking contradictions because oftentimes, they have to “accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity” (p. 7). As one of Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s respondents asked: “Is there some place I can go and be seen and be heard as a human being?”

Being Black and female are complex, race- and gender-related characteristics. Particularly for young, African American women, coming to know “self” has already been dictated through negative and demeaning social cues. However, part of the
uniqueness of Black women is that there is no one “cookie cutter” image of what an
African American woman is supposed to be. All Black women cannot be grouped into a
monolithic category designated solely for “African or Black American women only.”
Many share common and similar life experiences including the seven women who
participated in this study. However, to deny them the freedom and space to explore their
racial identity amongst other relevant identities (i.e. spirituality, sexuality) does a serious
injustice to their very existence. Jones and Shorter-Gooden offer an additional
perspective:

However, Black women shift, it is imperative
that each and every one remember who she is; that
she affirm her own gifts and those of her sisters.
(p. 280)

Re-thinking Black Racial Identity Development

While Cross’s (1991) model has been helpful in understanding how the seven
women have come to know themselves racially, there are several limitations to his model
as well that are applicable to this study. First, the current literature on racial identity
development still does not offer a single, conceptual definition (Ramseur, 1991).
Ramseur suggests that within the psychological and social sciences racial identity
development will often be referred to or defined as “Black identity, group identity, group
self-concept, ‘sense of peoplehood’ or ‘sense of Blackness’” (p. 365).

The seven women’s responses to the inquiries concerning racial identity
formation support Ramseur’s assertion. When asked specifically to define racial identity
development or racial identity formation, they offered various perspectives. For instance,
Janet believed that racial identity development was how an individual “identified based on their race.” Likewise, how that individual has been “socialized” might also factor into how he or she comes to view their racial selves. Shaunte’s definition added another dimension. She stated that an individual develops a racial identity in relation to their culture. Depending on how an individual “embraces or practices it” will determine how they create and form a racial “self.”

Several of the respondents also utilized examples or physical descriptions to define racial identity development. Using a young child as an example, Michelle suggested that racial identity meant learning about his or her “family origins and who and what they are to become.” Caliya’s definition acknowledged the color of her “brown skin.” Although Michele’s skin tone was lighter than that of her peers, it did not prevent her from seeing herself “as a Black person.” Even though she was of mixed heritages, Janet also admitted, “I identify more with the African American side of my heritage because that is how society sees me.”

Second, Cross’s (1991) model does not take into consideration how “class, gender and regional differences” intersect for individuals at “different stages” (Ramseur, 1991, p. 367). The processes of racial and gender identity formation are not fixed; they are in constant motion. Connolly (2001) concurs, suggesting that specific identities like race or ethnicity are “context-specific” and their “salience vary from one social setting to the next” (p. 220). Smith (1982) takes this concept of racial and ethnic identity a step further by contending that a variety of factors including “family background, socioeconomic
status and available role models” affect and influence how African American women come to know “who they are” (p. 263).

**Embracing Multiple Identities**

Apart from the identities that are associated generally with social institutions (i.e., family, school, church), at the very core of an individual is the “essence” of self. (McEwen, 2001, p. 191). Individuals began to craft “who they are” by interacting and engaging in their surrounding environments, whether that occurs physically, mentally or emotionally. McEwen also suggests that “changing environmental conditions may have an important effect on how an individual’s identity develops” (p. 210).

Given the diverse and varying life, educational and social experiences of the seven women who participated in this research study, constraining them to only one type of identity development might limit or deny the investigation or exploration of other socially-related identities. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity may be more appropriate in describing the life, educational and social experiences of the seven research participants.

The researchers’ model is “a fluid and dynamic one” that is not necessarily stage specific (p. 408). Rather, the model allows for movement and exploration of other social identities in addition to race and gender (p. 406). Jones and McEwen suggest that while the ten women in their study possessed personal “attributes and characteristics” that were central to their identities, “dimensions such as gender, race, culture and religion” were much more “externally defined” (p. 409).
The seven, undergraduate women who participated in this study identified as African American or bi-racial, but also ascribed to different family, faith, personal, professional and social membership identities. As Jones and McEwen suggest, their model is flexible enough in that “different dimensions of identity will be more or less important for each individual given a range of contextual influences” (p. 411). The underlying concept of embracing a multiple identity does not mean that an individual has to neglect or sacrifice one identity for another.

Similar to the model approach of Jones and McEwen, I contend that the research participants’ construction of a core identity may consist of creating a delicate balance between all of their social identities. For instance, when one identity is unstable, another identity may shift, assume the weight and re-balance and support the core identity. Or perhaps given the context that an individual is in, it may dictate which identity becomes the most salient. Lynn alluded to this balance in her perceptions about what is most important, being Black or a woman first:

“I don’t think it really matters. I actually depends on the situation. Because when you are with a bunch of African Americans, it is not like, ‘Oh, you are African American.’ But, if you are talking to a bunch of African American males, you are going to take the woman standpoint.”

In this instance, race was less salient for Lynn; however when she engaged in conversation with Africans American males, her gender identity was significant.

Lynn’s situational experiences mirrored some of the other research participants in their own personal growth and development. Shaunte had grown further away from her faith identity since arriving at the university after enrolling in several courses that called
her faith into question. Janet even admitted that faith had not been a strong factor in her life. Racial identity had been particularly salient for Kim and Caliya since they were reared in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools. Michelle’s close relationship with her mother placed her affiliation with her family near her core identity. By networking with older, professional sorors, Michele’s professional identity was already being formed and shaped. In the same manner, all of the young women ascribed to a social membership identity through their participation and involvement in traditional, Black Greek life.

Although the seven, undergraduate African American women ascribed to multiple identities, the identities were separate in their own right; however, they worked together and created a sense of balance, depending on the context or environment. Thus, their definitions of “self” were encompassing of many personal characteristics and dimensions, and not just one, single identity.
CHAPTER 6

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reported in Chapter 4 and interpreted in Chapter 5 suggest that the educational and social experiences of undergraduate, African American women attending a large, Research-I University are unique and diverse. The current literature often "lumps" Black women's life experiences together for generalization purposes without acknowledging that there is diversity within diversity. Although some Black women share similar life experiences, those who work with this population of undergraduate students, including administrators, faculty and staff, cannot continue to discount or ignore that all Black women are not the same.

6.1 Limitations of the Research Study and the Need for Additional Research

The limited sample size utilized in this study will certainly prevent it from being generalized to all African American women and are members of Black Greek sororities at PWIs. Additional research topics and concepts need to be explored and investigated fully. Aside from researching specific, student sub-cultures, there needs to be a greater emphasis on understanding why African American women pursue higher education in the first place. What attracts them to specific types of campuses (i.e., public or private, large or small, gender- or faith- affiliated)? Do geographical or regional differences exist in

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terms of the African American women who decide to attend college? How does the intersection of race, class and gender affect the college decision-making process? What institutional characteristics influence their college selection choice? From a student affairs perspective, how do multicultural organizations or ethnically themed organizations impact cognitive growth and student learning outcomes? Likewise, what types of student organizations best meet and fit their educational and social needs?

6.2 Implications and Recommendations

Although the size of this sample population limits the generalization to all women who are members of this student sub-culture, the themes that evolve out of the seven participants’ personal experiences do provide insight into how institutions of higher education can provide better educational and social services. The following are three recommendations deriving from the research study:

1. **Administrators, faculty and staff who work with this distinct population should strive to understand the individual histories of each student, especially as they pertain to this notion of multiple identities.**

   Having some knowledge of their past educational and social experiences, administrators, faculty and staff can assist undergraduate, African American women in easing the transition into the college environment. Likewise, supporting their exploration of appropriate campus programs and resources that are designed to support the needs of students of color might also aid in their persistence towards graduation. Constituents within the university setting must also acknowledge that there is diversity within
diversity, and not every Black woman’s experiences are like the next. However, pursuing a college degree is important to many African American women, and this pursuit may ultimately have a direct link to how they come to define themselves.

2. **The interaction and engagement that occurs between undergraduate, African American women and administrators, faculty and staff must foster relationships that are built on a sense of “belonging” in the college environment.**

Undergraduate, African American female students should not be made to feel any more marginalized because of their race or gender. In the classroom, they should be treated like any other student who is interested in defining and carving out their futures, and not as the “token, Black student” or the “speaker for the entire Black race.” Administrators, faculty and staff should also be aware of the historical experiences of African American women and their personal accounts of self-determination, self-sufficiency and the will to succeed.

In the same manner, co- or extra-curricular activities like traditional, Black Greek sororities should be one of the many types of student organizations that are offered and provided. Not only do these types of organizations foster a sense of sisterhood, emphasize academic excellence and a commitment to public service, but they also encourage personal growth and development along many identity continuums.

3. **Student Affairs professionals in particular who engage daily with this student population should acknowledge the role of family, role models/mentors, faith and social memberships in the lives of African American women.**
Evident in the narratives of the seven research participants, the support of family and the ability to look towards role models and mentors for inspiration has assisted in their persistence up until this point. Although faith was not a major factor in several of the research participants’ lives, some of the women still noted that it was an important element that they needed to re-commit to.

Likewise, being involved in multicultural or ethnically-themed organizations provided a sense of community that was otherwise missing from their in-class experiences. Colleges and universities provide the perfect forum where students can explore a sense of “self” without restraint. Those individuals who are committed to developing the whole student should not only value and support the education that can be obtained within the four walls of the institution, but also consider those social factors that continue to influence their lives outside of the classroom environment.

As the population of undergraduate, African American women pursuing higher education continues to increase, American colleges and universities must continue to explore how campus communities can be more receptive and inclusive of their educational and social needs. Additional research is needed and should continue to be approached from a multiple identities perspective. Perhaps then, the experiences of undergraduate, African American women who attend PWIs will become much clearer and more prevalent in the literature.
APPENDIX A

EXEMPTION APPROVAL
Dear Investigator(s),

You recently submitted an application for exemption. Your application has been determined to be exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board. The form that is enclosed with this letter is the notice of approval. Please keep this notice with your research materials.

The approval letter is being sent to you because you are listed as the Principal Investigator. Please copy the letter for any co-investigators who wish to have a copy.

Please note that exempt research is intended to be short term in nature - less than one year. It is anticipated that you will conduct the research as written and that you will not make changes to the research design, the selection of subjects, the informed consent process, or the instrumentation during the course of the study. Exempt research cannot be amended or extended.

Investigators are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects participating in research.

Please contact me if you have questions about the review process.

Sincerely,

Janet Schulte, CIP
Office of Responsible Research Practices
Biomedical Sciences IRB
Phone: 614-0369 / Fax: 614-0366
E-mail: Schulte.68@osu.edu
TITLE PAGE - APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM REVIEW BY THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD:
The Ohio State University, Columbus OH 43210

Principal Investigator

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Co-Investigator

Name: 

Campus Address (room, building, street address) or Mailing Address:

Signature: Date: 

Phone:
E-mail:

Protocol Title

The impact of sorority involvement on the development of racial identity for African American women in predominately white institutions

Source of Funding

For Office Use Only

Approved. Research has been determined to be exempt under the following categories:

Disapproved. The proposed research does not fall within the categories of exemption. Submit an application to the appropriate Institutional Review Board for review.

Date of determination: 10/29/03
Signature: 
Office of Research and Ethics Protection
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INVITATION
October 15, 2003

Name
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Prospective Participant:

My name is Davida L. Haywood and I am a second-year graduate student pursuing a Masters Degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA). Currently, I am in the process of completing my thesis, under the supervision of Dr. Ada Domb, my academic advisor. My thesis concerns how African American women come to define their sense of "self." Over the summer 2003 quarter, I completed my thesis proposal, and am ready to move on to the next step: conducting actual research.

My study is concerned with how African American women further develop their racial identity through extra-curricular activities and experiences that relate to their educational and social achievement, sense of community and sisterhood. Specifically, I am interested in how membership in the four, traditional Black Greek sororities at OSU supports or hinders members' racial identity development.

Through personal interviews with about a dozen sorority members, and a focus group conversation, I hope to gain insight about the following:

1. The support systems that traditional, Black Greek life might offer to African American women pursuing their undergraduate degree at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI);
2. The types of peer interaction chapter members have with each other, other students of color and non-minority students;
3. The life experiences, both prior to and during members' matriculation, that help define "who they are" in terms of their racial identity development.

I would like to explore these topics through conversations with African American women who have attained at least junior status and have been enrolled at OSU since their freshman year. I am looking for a total of 12 participants, three from each of the following: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. or Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. If this describes you, I would like to invite you to participate.
While each sorority possesses a history of traditions, rituals and ceremonies that are unique, these are not the focus of the inquiry. General information about the Greek-affiliated questions can be answered using "public knowledge," i.e., from websites and approved publications. My interest is in learning about your experience.

Participation in both the interview and focus group phases will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and at no time during the research process will participant names be used. All participants will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for reporting purposes. Interviews and the focus group conversations will be tape-recorded. All of the tapes and written materials will be maintained off-campus, labeled and locked in a safe cabinet.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, and were to become uncomfortable at any time, you may remove yourself from the process, with no consequences.

I would like to begin personal interviews during the month of November, and conclude with the focus groups at the beginning of December (before the autumn quarter ends). Individual interviews may last as much as 2 hours. I plan to organize the focus group/s in a late afternoon or early evening over snacks.

If you are interested in participating, please either call me at 614-472-0164 (home)/614-214-3833 (cell) or send an e-mail to haywood.21@osu.edu. Likewise, my academic and thesis advisor, Dr. Demb, is available as a resource and can be reached at 614-292-1855 or by e-mail at demb.1@osu.edu.

Thank you again for your interest, and I look forward to hearing from you.

David L. Haywood
2nd Year Master Student
Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA)

Ada Demb, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
School of Educational Policy & Leadership
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

I consent to participating in research entitled: The impact of sorority involvement on the racial identity development for African-American women in predominantly white institutions. Davida Haywood, co-PI and the authorized representative of the Principal Investigator (Dr. Ada Demb) has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ________________ Date: ________________

Signed: ___________________ Signed: ___________________

Co-PI Participant

SECTIONS:

Cultural Studies Quantitative Research, Evaluation and Measurement Educational Administration and Higher Education General Professional Studies

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APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Individual Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. As I mentioned in your letter of invitation, I am conducting research on how African American women further develop their racial identity through extra-curricular activities and experiences that relate to their educational and social achievement, sense of community and sisterhood. Specifically, I am interested in how membership in the four, traditional Black Greek sororities supports or hinders members' racial identity development.

First, I am going to request that you read and complete a “Statement of Consent” form. Please sign and date it. I will do the same and provide you with a copy. By signing this form, you have agreed to participate in this study. I have agreed to ensure that all of the information you share remains confidential. Please note that the pseudonym you have chosen will be used throughout the research study.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape your responses, as well as take notes. If at any time you become uncomfortable during the taping, please signal to me and I will turn the tape recorder off.

With that in mind, are you comfortable and ready to proceed? I will begin the tape recorder now.

I want to explore several topics with you, but also want to get to know you personally.
Interview Questions

Personal

- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- Classification/Year of Status:
- Major:
- Enrollment Status: Full-time Part-time
- What year and quarter did you begin your matriculation at OSU?
- What year and quarter do you expect to graduate?

Researcher: Thank you. Now, I would like to begin with several icebreaker questions.

Ice-Breaker Questions

1. Could you share with me why you decided to attend OSU to complete your undergraduate degree? (Probing: Would you have considered any other institution or type of institution (i.e. HBCU)?)

2. Would you tell me how you came to learn of this institution and its academic programs? (Probing: Through a guidance counselor, family member or alumna/alumnus?)

Racial Identity Development

3. The words "Racial Identity Development" or "Racial Identity Formation" evoke various meanings, definitions and experiences for different people. What do these words mean to you?

4. How have you come to define your racial identity?

5. What words do you use to describe your racial identity?

6. Before you enrolled in college, were there any particular life experiences that caused you to consider how you "see yourself" in terms of your race? (Probing: Were you ever the recipient of a racist comment/joke or had to assimilate into a non-minority setting?)

7. Would you tell me what it means to be an African American or Black woman? (Probing: Do you identify as being African American or Black first, then a woman or vice versa? How does your race and gender relate?)
Family

8. Could you describe for me the kind of influence your parent(s) or family members have had on your pursuit of a college degree?

9. Growing up, how did your parent(s) or family members address the issue of race? (Probing: Was it an easy or difficult topic to discuss?)

10. Would you share with me how your family celebrated your racial heritage or acknowledged your racial background? (Probing: Did your family celebrate certain holidays or participate in special ceremonies?)

11. Could you tell me about how you first became aware of the traditionally, Black Greek Sororities and Fraternities? (Probing: Were there members of your family or in the community that you were familiar with? In what capacity (i.e. Teacher, parent, minister?)

Mentor/Role Model

12. Would you tell me about a person who has had a significant impact on your life? (Probing: A family member, teacher, minister or community servant?)

13. How has this person assisted you in helping to define "who you are?"

14. Would you share with me the importance of speaking with or talking to this person/s? (Probing: How often do you talk or speak with them?)

Faith-Related

15. Would you tell me how faith or a dedication to a specific religion might have shaped your life experiences?

16. Would you share with me how faith has influenced "who you are" as an African American or Black American?

17. Would you describe to me how your place of worship celebrated your racial heritage or acknowledged your racial background? (Probing: Did your church celebrate certain holidays or participate in special ceremonies?)

Pre-College/In-College

18. Before coming to OSU, would you tell me what you thought the "college or university experience" was going to be like? (Probing: What were your expectations?)
19. Would you describe what your educational and social experiences have been like since you enrolled at OSU? (Probing: What has it been like to be an African American or Black woman on this campus?)

20. How would you describe the institution's programs, administrative offices and resources that are designed to support African American or Black students?

21. Could you share with me if you have had the opportunity to connect with these resources, whether that has been with an office or a specific individual? (Probing: Have you visited the Office of Minority Affairs or have you found a faculty member to serve as a mentor?)

22. Could you share with me if your definition of "self," in terms of your racial identification, has changed since enrolling at OSU?

23. Would you tell me what you think about the African American or Black, student community on this campus? (Probing: Is it a strong community of students? Are there problems? Is the community divided? Are there issues or concerns that they all share?)

24. Could you share with me how you interact with other students of color and students who are of the majority here on campus? (Probing: Do you interact with them just in the classroom setting, or have you been able to establish relationships outside of that particular setting?)

**Sorority**

25. Would you talk with me about why you wanted to join a traditional Black Greek sorority? (Probing: What are the benefits of membership?)

26. Could you tell me what it is like to be a member of a traditional Black Greek sorority at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)? (Probing: Would you speculate about how different it might have been at a Historically Black College or University?)

27. Could you share with me how your membership has influenced your being as an African American or Black woman? (Probing: Given the opportunity, would you join again?)

28. Would you share with me your impression of how the four, Black Greek sororities see each other? (Probing: Could you provide me with examples that come out of your impressions?)

29. Would you share with me your impression of how non-Greek, African American women see the four, Black Greek sororities on campus? (Probing: Could you provide me with examples that come out of your impressions?)
30. Could you share with me the perceptions of the non-minority community towards Black Greek life here on campus? (Probing: How are Black Greeks perceived? What is the interaction level like between Black Greeks and the campus community?)

31. Could you share with me about where you see the Black Greek sorority experience fitting in, in your life after you leave OSU?

32. Would you tell me what you think about the Black Greek community on this campus? (Probing: Is it a strong community? Are there problems? Is the Black Greek community divided? Are there issues or concerns that they all share?)

33. Could you share with me your perceptions of the multicultural fraternities and sororities here on campus? (Probing: Could you provide me with examples that come out of your impressions?)

34. Can you share with me how your parent(s) perceived your joining a sorority? (Probing: Or other family and community members? Did your relationship change, if any?)

35. Would you share with me your perceptions about hazing and Black Greek Life? (Probing: How do you see hazing affecting our organizations over the next few years? At Predominantly White Institutions?)

36. Can you share with me how important scholarship or academic excellence is to your organization?

37. Would you share with me if you would advocate these types of organizations, to other Black women?

**Conclusion**

You have provided me with a wealth of information. Since this is my first time conducting research in this manner, I tried to ask questions that would speak to your life experiences. Please take a moment to think about our conversation. Is there an area or something that I have overlooked or did not ask? (Pause)

38. Would you like to share anything else about your college or sorority experience that would help me understand how you have come to develop your racial identity?
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for participating in the individual interviews, as well as agreeing to participate in the focus group. I would like to remind you that I am conducting research on how African American women further develop their racial identity through extra-curricular activities and experiences that relate to their educational and social achievement, sense of community and sisterhood. Specifically, I am interested in how membership in the four, traditional Black Greek sororities supports or hinders members’ racial identity development.

First, I am going to request that you write the pseudonym you have chosen on your table tent and place it in front of you. Please note, I will continue to use the name you have chosen throughout the study and your responses will remain confidential. Likewise, you have all completed, signed and been provided a copy of the "Statement of Informed Consent." Does anyone need for me to read it again or address any questions that relate to the form?

With your permission, I would like to audiotape your responses, as well as take notes. If at any time you become uncomfortable during the taping, please signal to me and I will turn the tape recorder off.

I am also requesting that during the audiotaping, we attempt to adhere to the following norms:
1. To respect others’ ideas and thoughts.
2. To refrain from generalizing one participant’s experiences to all of the other participants.
3. To attempt to listen without being judgmental.
4. To allow participants to complete all of their ideas or thoughts before someone else can begin to speak.

With that in mind, are all of you comfortable and ready to proceed? I will begin the tape recorder now.

I would like to address the following questions.

1. How did the individual interviews impact you, in terms of you having to think about your own racial identity development, membership in a traditional, Black Greek organization and presence at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?

2. Have you come to any new or different ideas or revelations that were not shared during your personal interview?

3. What brought about this change in your original thoughts or ideas?
4. Is there anything else regarding racial identity development, membership in a traditional, Black Greek organization and presence at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) that you wish to share?

Thank you again for your participation!
LIST OF REFERENCES


